KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN

FACULTEIT PSYCHOLOGIE EN
PEDAGOGISCHE WETENSCHAPPEN
LABORATORIUM VOOR
EDUCATIE EN SAMENLEVING

LUC VAN DEN BERGE

PARENTING SUPPORT REVISITED: RETRIEVING AN ETHICS OF HERMENEUTICS

A philosophical investigation inspired by the viewpoints of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Taylor

PROEFSCHRIFT AANGEBODEN TOT
HET VERKRIJGEN VAN DE GRAAD VAN DOCTOR
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PROMOTOR — PROF. DR. STEFAN RAMAEKERS
CO-PROMOTOR — PROF. DR. JUDITH SUISSA

FEBRUARI 2017

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Ein vielgereister Sophist frägt Sokrates:
‘Stehst Du immer noch da und sagst
immer dasselbe? Du machst Dir die Sache
aber leicht‘. Sokrates antwortet:
‘Nein, ihr Sophisten macht es euch leicht,
denn ihr sagt immer das Neueste und
Allerneueste und immer etwas anderes.
Das schwere aber ist, das Selbe zu sagen
und das allerschwerste: vom Selben
das Selbe zu sagen‘.

– Martin Heidegger

Wie schwer fällt mir zu sehen,
was *vor meinen Augen liegt*!

– Ludwig Wittgenstein

Abstract

Parenting support revisited: retrieving an ethics of hermeneutics. A philosophical investigation inspired by the viewpoints of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Taylor.

Dissertation to obtain the degree of Doctor in Educational Sciences, February 2017, Laboratory for Education and Society.

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Stefan Ramaekers

Co-supervisor: Prof. Dr. Judith Suissa

This dissertation aims at gaining insight in our late modern moral backgrounds by considering the case of 'parenting support'. The method it uses is a hermeneutical one, drawing on Polt's idea that interpretation is a continuous attempt to gain a deeper insight in something, by revising and elaborating existing interpretations. Starting from everyday lived experiences these investigations try to narrow the hermeneutical circle by going back-and-forth between the abstract thinking of philosophy on the one hand and everyday experiences on the other. Four methodical 'conjectures' concerning our late modern Western world serve as signposts: (1) that parents are a priori supposed to be in need of support, though it remains unclear what kind of support they need and what this implies for the way support is offered; (2) that parents are infantilized and instrumentalized; (3) that parenting support in a standard way makes use of scientific results and even more so of scientific terminology and frameworks; (4) that notwithstanding this, it is still possible to develop alternative ways of

supporting parents that take parents seriously as the full-blown moral and political beings they are. More in general the assumption is that the first three issues are symptomatic of what Taylor has called *a disengaged stance* in our culture: the idea that sense giving backgrounds are necessary to be able to make sense of the world is forgotten and replaced by the idea that understanding boils down to an objective and thus ideally contextless causal explanation of phenomena. It may seem that this dissertation begs the question, i.e. assumes what needs to be proven, by drawing on philosophers who in line with Kant's *transcendental deduction* show that phenomena as 'knowing' and 'being able to' imply certain contexts as necessary conditions: Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Taylor. The purpose is however to gain a deeper insight, not to prove that they are right in believing so. These philosophers give us terminologies and ways of thinking that help to take a critical distance from what is so nearby, that we can hardly grasp it. Conceptual distinctions help us to see that parents can be construed as 'victims' of evolutions in their societies that are taken as external and causal, or, as actors who are connected with their society, and feel responsible for what happens in it. Science-based parenting support seems to be less informing parents then initiating them in certain frameworks and to reduce them to *means to an end* without allowing them the status of adulthood in a moral and political sense. Above all, parenting support seems to be more supportive of parenting processes than of parents with all their questions. This entails that parents are construed as 'figures of disengagement' who are in principle capable of dealing with their children and the domain of child rearing from a disengaged scientific manner. Parenting support stands clearly in need of revision, as well as the role and the self-understanding of the figure that gives the support: it can become a figure of engagement in the strong sense that applies an ethics of hermeneutics. More in general the conclusion will be that an *ethics of hermeneutics* is to be preferred over an *ethics of causality* if the aim is to support parents *qua* parents.

Samenvatting

'Parenting support' herbekeken: het terugwinnen van een ethiek van de hermeneutiek. Een filosofisch onderzoek geïnspireerd door de gezichtspunten van Heidegger, Wittgenstein en Taylor.

De opzet van dit proefschrift is om inzicht te verwerven in onze hedendaagse laatmoderne *morele achtergronden* door na te denken over de casus 'parenting support' (een niet echt in het Nederlands te vertalen begrip). De methode is hermeneutisch en maakt gebruik van Polts idee dat interpretatie een voortdurend pogen is om tot een dieper begrijpen van iets te komen, door bestaande interpretaties te herzien en verder uit te werken. Beginnend bij alledaagse 'geleefde' ervaringen trachten deze onderzoekingen de hermeneutische cirkel kleiner te maken door een heen-en-weer gaan tussen het abstracte denken van de filosofie enerzijds en de alledaagse ervaring anderzijds. Vier methodische 'vermoedens' over onze laatmoderne Westerse wereld doen daarbij dienst als wegwijzer: (1) dat ouders *a priori* geacht worden steun nodig te hebben, waarbij nog niet helder is welke steun precies en wat dat impliceert voor de geboden steun; (2) dat ouders worden geïnfantiliseerd en geïnstrumentaliseerd; (3) dat *parenting support* standaard gebruik maakt van resultaten en vooral de terminologie of denkkaders van (harde) wetenschappen; en (4) dat het desondanks mogelijk is om alternatieven te bedenken voor *parenting support* en dus om ouders te steunen, die ouders niet infantiliseren en instrumentaliseren door hen wel au sérieux te nemen als de volwaardig morele en politieke actoren die ze zijn. Meer algemeen is de aanname dat de eerste drie kwesties symptomatisch zijn voor wat Taylor een 'onthecht standpunt' genoemd heeft: de idee dat zingevende contexten nodig zijn om zin te geven aan

de dingen raakt ondergesneeuwd en wordt vervangen door de idee dat begrijpen neerkomt op een objectief en dus idealiter contextloos, causaal verklaren van fenomenen. Nu lijkt het er misschien op dat dit proefschrift al aanneemt wat bewezen dient te worden (*question begging)* door precies filosofen aan het woord te laten die in navolging van Kants *transcendentale deductie* aantonen dat fenomenen als kennen en kunnen niet zonder contexten mogelijk zijn, met name Heidegger, Wittgenstein en Taylor. Het doel is echter om tot verheldering en dieper begrip te komen, niet om te bewijzen dat zij het bij het rechte eind hebben. Deze filosofen reiken een terminologie en een wijze van denken aan die helpen om afstand te nemen van wat zo nabij is, dat die nabijheid ons het zicht erop ontneemt. Conceptuele onderscheidingen helpen om te zien dat ouders kunnen opgevat worden als 'slachtoffers' van evoluties in de samenleving die als extern en causaal worden opgevat, maar ook als 'actoren' die wezenlijk verbondenheid met, en verantwoordelijkheid voor hun samenleving ervaren. Op wetenschappelijke leest geschoeide 'parenting support' lijkt niet zozeer ouders te informeren dan wel hen in te leiden binnen bepaalde denkkaders en hen in dezelfde beweging te herleiden tot middelen of instrumenten zonder hen het statuut van volwassenen te gunnen in een morele en politieke zin van het woord. Bovenal, lijkt 'parenting support' er eerder op uit te zijn om 'parenting' te ondersteunen dan ouders (parents) met al hun vragen. Dit houdt in dat ouders opgevat worden als 'figuren van onthechting' die in de mogelijkheid verkeren om hun kinderen en het ganse domein van opvoeden te benaderen vanuit een onthechte of wetenschappelijke manier. Het lijkt dus de moeite waard om het hele 'parenting support' gebeuren te herzien. Dit komt neer op een herbekijken van de rol en het zelfverstaan van degene die ouders steunt: zij wordt een figuur van betrokkenheid in een sterke zin van het woord die zich laat leiden door een *ethiek van het hermeneutische*. Meer algemeen zal de conclusie zijn dat een *ethiek van het hermeneutische* te verkiezen valt boven een *ethiek van causaliteit* als men ouders werkelijk wil steunen *als* ouders.

Dankwoord

Heidegger schrijft in *Zijn en Tijd* dat het *erzijn* zich ervoor behoedt om 'te oud te zijn voor zijn overwinningen' [264]. Dat is mij alvast niet gelukt. Desalniettemin ben ik zeer dankbaar dat ik de kans heb gekregen om dit doctoraatsonderzoek niet alleen aan te vatten, maar ook tot een goed einde te brengen.

Toen ik in het najaar van 2007 mijn filosofiestudie had afgerond beslisten we bij een etentje in Brussel dat ik bij Patricia De Martelaere zou promoveren als filosoof. Het lot beschikte daar anders over. Gelukkig had zij mij jaren voordien al in contact gebracht met een toenmalige doctoraatsstudent, die promoveerde bij Paul Smeyers als wijsgerig pedagoog.

Ik zocht Stefan Ramaekers opnieuw op in juni 2009 om een artikel dat ik had geschreven over Wittgenstein met hem te bespreken. Hij was toen pasbenoemd in Leuven. Enthousiast en genadeloos bekritiseerde hij mijn tekst. Ik vroeg hem, onder de indruk van zijn scherpe analytische geest en zijn warme persoonlijkheid, *en passant* of ik bij hem kon promoveren. Tot mijn verbazing zei hij 'ja'. Het was het begin van een ondertussen jarenlange fijne samenwerking.

Stefan was altijd bereid om vroege versies van teksten te lezen, en hij slaagde erin om mij mijn schaamte te doen overwinnen om wat in mijn ogen vaak nonsens leek toch met hem en nadien met anderen te delen. Onze inhoudelijke discussies haalden mij telkens weer constructief onderuit en leverden veel betere teksten op dan ik ooit in mijn eentje had kunnen schrijven.

Mijn onderzoekswerk deed mij zo nu en dan in een levensdilemma belanden en dan kon ik bij Stefan steeds weer terecht voor wat ik met een ouderwets begrip 'morele ondersteuning' wil noemen. Ik plaagde de pedagoog in hem meermaals met het compliment dat aan hem een 'goede' psycholoog verloren was gegaan. Hoewel we beiden soms onder hoge tijdsdruk stonden bleef onze verstandhouding altijd amicaal. Stefans bijdrage aan dit proefschrift is in meerdere opzichten onmetelijk.

Vrij vlug bracht Stefan mij in contact met Judith Suissa. Naast mijn *Doktorvater* stond nu een *Doktormutter*. Judith heeft alle onderdelen van dit werk grondig nagelezen en haar lovende en kritische blik hielpen mij om het onderzoekswerk vol te houden. Toen ik haar ooit schreef dat ik steeds zo vreselijk bleef twijfelen aan de kwaliteit van mijn werk troostten mij haar woorden dat ze collega's die twijfelen verkoos boven hen die al te zeker van hun stuk zijn. Zij keek ook mijn Engelse teksten na en heeft mij daardoor veel gêne bespaard. Mijn kennis van de Engelse woordenschat is hoe dan ook ruim onvoldoende om haar op een voor haar begrijpelijke manier te bedanken voor wat ze voor mijn onderzoek heeft betekend.

Ik bedank uitdrukkelijk Jan Masschelein, Paul Standish, Paul Smeyers en Naomi Hodgson voor hun constructieve opmerkingen bij eerdere versies van de verschillende hoofdstukken en meer nog voor hun steeds weer warme en fijne bejegening telkens ik een van hen ontmoette. Ik ben het *Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek* zeer erkentelijk om mij een bijzondere doctoraatsbeurs toe te kennen en mij zo de kans te geven om een jaar uitsluitend met mijn onderzoek bezig te zijn. Het is een van de mooiste jaren van mijn leven geworden, en ik heb in dat jaar ongeveer evenveel gerealiseerd als gedurende alle voorgaande.

Na de publicatie van mijn eerste hoofdstuk, drong het langzaam tot mij door dat mijn oude leraar Annie Mattheeuws steeds met me mee aan het schrijven was. Annies denken maakt een dermate vanzelfsprekend onderdeel uit van mijn zingevende en morele achtergronden, dat ik dat altijd weer erg laat in de gaten krijg.

Waar in de kilte van het Galileïsche mechanistische universum de dood het einde betekent van een *agent*, lijkt hij in de wereld van onze menselijke zingeving vaker een bron van verdere betekenisgeving te zijn. Flor Peeters is een andere levensreus 'aan gene zijde' die een toetssteen blijft voor mijn gedachten en die ik helaas niet meer in dit ondermaanse kan tonen dat zijn 'jonge vriend' het gehaald heeft.

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Acknowledgements

In *Being and Time* Heidegger writes that *Dasein* guards itself against 'becoming too old for its victories' [264]. Well, that's something I for one did not manage. Nevertheless I am very grateful not only for having been given the opportunity to start this doctoral research, but also for having been able to bring it to a successful conclusion.

When, in the autumn of 2007, I had completed my philosophy studies it was decided over a diner in Brussels that I would get a doctor's degree in philosophy with Patricia De Martelaere as my supervisor. Fate decided otherwise. Luckily, years before, she had presented me to the then doctoral student who was working with Paul Smeyers to obtain a doctorate in philosophy of education.

I got in touch again with Stefan Ramaekers in June 2009 to pick his brain on an article I wrote on Wittgenstein. He had then just been appointed in Leuven. He criticised my text with enthusiasm but without pity. Impressed by his sharp and analytical mind and warm personality, I haphazardly asked him whether he would accept to be my supervisor. And to my surprise he accepted. This was the start of a fine and by now long-standing collaboration.

Stefan was always prepared to read early versions of my texts and he succeeded in making me get over my reluctance of sharing with him – and others later on – what to me often seemed nonsensical. Time and again, our discussions on the substance pulled the rug from under my feet but always in a constructive way which resulted in much better texts than I would have been able to write on my own.

From time to time, my research got me in a life dilemma and on moments like these Stefan always stood ready to provide me with what I would like to refer to – with a rather old-fashioned notion – as 'moral support'. On several occasions, I teased the pedagogue in him with the compliment that he would have made a 'good' psychologist. Although we were both under severe time pressure, our relationship was always amicable. Stefan's contribution to this thesis is immeasurable in many respects.

Very quickly Stefan introduced me to Judith Suissa. Besides my *Doktorvater,* I now also had a *Doktormutter.* Judith thoroughly read through all parts of this work and her praising comments and critical look helped me to keep up my research work. When I wrote to her once to tell her how terribly unsure I was about the quality of my work, she comforted me by replying that she preferred colleagues who doubt above those who are all too sure of themselves. She also corrected my English and doing so saved me much embarrassment. As it is, my knowledge of the English vocabulary is far from adequate enough to allow me to thank her for what she has meant for my research in a way that makes sense to her.

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After I had my first chapter published, I slowly came to realize that my old teacher Annie Mattheeuws was always writing alongside me. Annie's thinking is so much a part of my sense-giving and moral backgrounds, that it usually takes me a while to notice her presence. Where

in the coldness of the Galilean mechanical universe death means the end of an *agent*, on a human level we tend to perceive it as a source of ongoing meaning. Flor Peeters is another of my life giants who 'crossed to the other side' but continues to be a touchstone for my thoughts. And I regret that I can no longer show him in the sublunary world that his 'young friend' made it.

For their goodwill and logistic support, their patience and know-how I would like to thank Maria Leon, Bartel Wilms and in particularly Valerie Van Holderbeke for her help during the proverbial last mile. I am very grateful to my sister Hilde for helping me out with the translation of parts of this dissertation.

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I am also very grateful to the many parents who put their trust in me at *De Luwte* and *the RCGG*. They were my biggest source of inspiration.

Of course, none of this would have been possible or had any significance without Sabine, who supported and inspired me in so many ways no words can ever begin to express. And finally, I would like to mention someone who every day again puts his dad *in medias res*: Jonas.

Table of contents

Introduction

Let me start with some preliminary terminological remarks. When looking at the terms used in the world of parenting and parenting support today, and if, for the moment, we stick with English usage, we must say that the term that has become predominant in our late-modern (Anglophone) Western cultures is 'parenting', rather than child-rearing or upbringing. Many commentators have remarked on this and have shone a light on this fairly recent phenomenon. The linguist Couchman (1983) traces the use of 'parenting' as a common denominator of what parents do back to the mid-seventies, although its use has been reported much earlier. As opposed to 'parenthood', it seems to involve an active stance on the part of parents, hence, as he writes in his very detailed 'informal survey': 'On 20 Oct. and 28 0ct. 1979 there were 'learned discussions of the "techniques of parenting" and the "parenting" process.' In his comments on Couchman, Smith (2010) concludes up that parenting is largely seen as a technical matter, that is often referred to as 'almost the toughest job human beings have'. Furthermore, it is a process involving techniques, in which experts have a proper role. In the meantime, it has become so current in its uses, with this skein of interdependent meanings that Smith points out (technical, skills that can be learned, experts who draw on science, something that is hard to do and so on) and that silently accompanies it, that at the outset of my philosophical research, I decided to take the term at face value as a rich term that contains (and probably changes) older terms such as rearing children or upbringing. I also chose not to differentiate, at least at the beginning of my research, between parent support and parenting support as is done for instance

by Ramaekers (2010) because I wanted to understand why the combination of 'parenting' and 'support' is so dominant.

Scholars in the field also distinguish between supporting parents in the case of serious problems and parenting support that tries to reach every parent, often in order to prevent problems or because parenting is seen as a means to an end by policy-makers and politicians. I just wanted to start from the obvious 'given' that as a parent in our late modern Western societies, one cannot escape parenting support. It will be provided to her or him, whether (s)he likes it or not, whether there are more serious problems, for instance on the level of parental or child behaviour, or not.

In the meantime, the proposition 'parenting exists' belongs indeed to the obvious and hence silent bedrock of our contemporary convictions – it is beyond doubt, as the later Wittgenstein of *On Certainty* would have said – at least in the Anglophone world: in Dutch, for instance, 'parenting' has no equivalent. Notwithstanding this, when we look at some of the most popular parenting manuals or websites in Flanders, they seem to be informed by the same skein of meanings: in our globalised world the fact that there is no equivalent term does not seem to mean that there are no equivalent practices. So one might wonder why in English, grammar not only prepared a place for it, but also had a word available, while for instance in Dutch although the place was vacant, there was no candidate word. In Dutch the word for 'a parent' is 'een ouder', and the verb 'to parent' would be translated as 'ouderen', but this word already means 'elderly people'. In The Netherlands it is on the other hand more common than in Flanders to say 'to mother' or 'to father' (*bemoederen*, *bevaderen*, used as a transitive verb). We can thus say that the proposition 'parenting exists' expresses – no more, no less than – a contingent and temporal truth. Thus everything written in this dissertation has only a limited significance. On the other hand, this is 'our' time, and it is up to us to try to make sense of it, and, even to try to embrace it, since we as educators, cannot afford to be too critical of our world,

that, as Arendt (2006 [1954]) famously contends in *The Crisis of Education*, we should protect and pass on to our children. In order to be better able to embrace it, I believe it is important to make sense of it. One reason to engage in such an enterprise is the belief that this hermeneutical effort, in articulating our world, can and will change it (Taylor, 2016, 117).

This philosophical investigation tries to make sense of our time, by addressing our contemporary *parenting support culture*. It consists of a compilation of published *essays* – a word that derives from the French verb '*essayer*', to try. As it is informed by a hermeneutical stance, it might be accused of lacking a more systematic structure. In understanding, that is the lesson to be drawn from modern hermeneutics, one always starts somewhere, with no more and no less than a preliminary understanding. There are two personal experiences that put me as a researcher and philosopher in *medias res* and urged me to reflect philosophically on issues of parenting and parenting support, starting from my preliminary understanding of them. The first was becoming a father myself and experiencing the strange and paradoxical feeling that once one becomes a parent, she or he is in a certain sense taken less seriously, is often no longer treated as an adult human being, who is capable of moral and political thinking and acting. I remember an information session at my son's school, where the assembled group of parents were addressed by the schoolteacher as if they were little children themselves. This was still an unarticulated feeling though, that I perhaps could better describe as a slightly disturbing gut feeling, and I found some words for it when, by chance, I came across the Dutch translation of the first edition of Furedi's *Paranoid Parenting* (2001a and b). When I read the Introduction to this first edition, it was as if someone was speaking my mind. Furedi gave words to my unarticulated feelings. Soon I was to discover however that *his* words were indeed *his*, as I wasn't completely satisfied with the way he treated the subject. I began to wonder if this domain of questions perhaps deserved a more philosophical treatment. The second somehow paradoxical experience stems from my work with parents as a parent counsellor in

a *Child and adolescent mental health service* in Ghent, where I work(ed) as a psychotherapist with children and/or their parents. There I discovered that although parents often urgently demanded practical educational advice, they weren't always happy when I gave it. I felt that they also wanted to be given space to reflect on their self-understanding, and that they were often fed up with the way they looked at themselves and their children, who, being patients in an ambulatory child psychiatric service, often displayed difficult behaviour or had severe mental health issues that were truly challenging to them as parents. I noticed that, next to the obligatory practical advice, they often found relief in fresh insights, about themselves, about their children, or about whatever truly mattered to them, on the condition that the new insight was truly their own, or that they at least could appropriate it. Where they often, initially, asked for help with finding new actions or strategies, they often settled for reflection, with a new insight, with revising their self-understanding, or with being changed themselves. These two experiences within the field of parenting and parenting support kept on puzzling me.

But were they worthy of philosophical treatment? Thiselton (2009, 10) reminds us of 'what Gadamer perceives as a fundamental contrast between confronting philosophical "problems" in abstraction from what gave rise to them in human life, and exploring "questions that arise" within a chain of question-and-answer that reflect concrete situations in human life'. From this, Thiselton remarks, an important contrast arises between hermeneutical philosophy and more traditional philosophical thought, and he also mentions Wittgenstein as a proponent of such a contextualized and engaged philosophical approach.

> Gadamer expounds this fundamental contrast between abstract 'problems' and processes of questioning embedded in life as a key philosophical divide. (…) This is no minor or hairsplitting distinction. It underlies almost the whole of Gadamer's approach and his formulation of philosophical hermeneutics. (…) It also reflects the

> distinctive approach of the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1952), who argues that conceptual questions cannot be asked 'outside' a particular language game, by which he means 'the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven'. (ibid. 11)

Still, Gadamer and Wittgenstein, as well as Heidegger, preferred to philosophize about very abstract notions. For instance, Heidegger didn't want to digress on ontic matters in his *Being and Time*, and it was not until his meeting and further cooperation with the Swiss psychiatrist Médard Boss, that was published as *The Zollikon Seminars*, that he showed a genuine philosophical interest in concrete or ontic matters. I want to tread in Heidegger's footsteps, in a sense, by indeed trying to philosophize about ontic matters. To reiterate, if we truly want to try to make sense of our lived experiences in our current time, we cannot but start *in medias res*. We cannot but start with as Schleiermacher puts it, a preliminary knowledge of human beings and a preliminary knowledge of the subject-matter (1977, 59). What makes this research philosophical in a hermeneutical sense, I believe, is the fact that it tries very consistently to go back and forth from the abstract to the concrete; that is, it tries to cover both. It tries to situate philosophical problems in the lives of real people, and it tries to connect the lives of real people with more abstract and philosophical issues. As Thiselton (2009, 156) and Polt (1999, 41) suggest, it is perhaps better to use the image of a hermeneutical spiral, than that of a hermeneutical circle, to describe this type of investigation.

For Heidegger, Polt (1999, 41) contends,

> Interpretation (…) is the act of developing one's understanding of something and illuminating the thing. For example, when I learn that a gesture means that something is too expensive, I have interpreted the gesture. Of course, my interpretation does not have to stop here – for instance, I can investigate what counts as 'expen-

> sive'. In fact, an interpretation is always subject to revision and elaboration. (…) Heidegger himself follows a 'spiral' structure, in which he continually reinterprets the phenomena. There is no point at which we can safely conclude this process of interpretation and reach a perfect, definitive account of things.

Every time we go through it, we reach a new, perhaps better insight or understanding. To paraphrase Wittgenstein (1969, §141), 'light dawns gradually over the whole'.

One thing a hermeneutical perspective reveals is that not only becoming, but also being a parent, unceasingly reinterprets one's whole way of being, whether one likes it or not. It interprets oneself. This does not mean that parents are better or worse human beings than people who are not parents. Nor do I believe this interpretive relation is restricted to biological parents, for that matter. But the whole hermeneutical idea of our not only actively interpreting texts, but also being interpreted by texts, of all kinds, in other words, also by other beings, or in the case of parents, by having children, deserves a philosophical treatment. On the other hand, this ontological given is always concretized in lived experiences, for instance the experience of being the father of *my* son, of *this* child, *these* children. Without the latter category, the former does not make any sense at all. (The particular is contextualised by the general and vice versa.)

So my questions arise from concrete experiences in idiosyncratic situations in human life, and thus from a hermeneutical perspective my investigation is philosophical, although (or just because) it is firmly rooted in questions that arise in the everyday domain of parenthood and the education or upbringing of children. In fact, I try to make sense of concrete experiences as situated in and typical of our late

modern Western cultures[1]. By calling them Western cultures I emphatically do not intend to deny the multifaceted cultural, historical, linguistic, social, religious, age-related, sex-related and other *factual* diversity of these societies. I want rather to expose the fact that these late modern Western societies often forget to take this diversity into account in their collective self-understandings, for instance in their technical conception of parenting and parenting support, as became apparent in the course of my investigation.

Given its nature, this philosophical and hermeneutical investigation did not start from hypotheses in the strict sense of the word. It started from an unease with the current state of affairs in the practices of parenting support and from a dissatisfaction regarding the theoretical articulation of these practices. Related to this unease, and informed by existing critical literature on the matter at hand, I elaborated on my first paradoxical experiences and articulated a number of 'conjectures' or preliminary interpretations, or 'pre-understandings', that require a hermeneutical effort to be articulated and clarified further. To sum up:

> Parents in the beginning of the 21sth century in our Western societies are supposed (expected?) to be in need of (some kind of) support. One of the clearest indicators for this is the enormous amount of parenting advice literature and parenting websites.

1 I want to make a remark about the use of 'we 'or 'us' when referring to 'our' late modern western societies. I do realize this 'we' does not coincide with all the inhabitants of these societies. Many of them do not recognize this western perspective as their own. One of the groups, for instance, whose members do not always reckon themselves among our western societies are Muslims – who form by the way also an internally differentiated group, who for instance follow different law schools. I believe it is precisely a problem that the predominant parenting (support) account speaks blindly and naively in the name of a universal 'we'. Perhaps because it is informed by a scientist viewpoint that doesn't consider itself to be a viewpoint, a denial that in its paradoxicality is precisely constitutive of this (perspectiveless) perspective. As such it can become blind for the import of religion, sex and gender, culture, values and norms, and the idiosyncrasy of personal contexts, in short, of the necessity of context for meaning. I like to refer to Wittgenstein who might be criticized for not being more specific when he uses 'we' in his philosophical remarks. He was however (one of) the first to distinguish between different world-pictures (in his *On Certainty*), and thus to problematize the naïve use of 'we'.

Parents often are not taken seriously as the full-blown adults they are in many of the current parenting support practices: they are instrumentalized[2] and infantilized.

Parenting support is often science-based, which means that (1) parents are less well informed than scientists, and thus in an asymmetrical relationship, which can account for (b) because parents are made dependent on a language game they cannot ever, nor are expected to, master themselves; and (2) that parents can experience a tension between more 'natural'[3] or usual ways of conceptualizing child rearing and the prescribed ways of understanding themselves and their parenting within a scientific framework (a tension that is not acknowledged nor addressed within this scientific framework itself).

It is possible though to develop or at least conceptualize practices of parenting support and counselling that take parents seriously as the full-blown moral and political subjects they are; and probably such practices already exist, but they remain hidden behind the dominant picture of parenting support.

As in Polt's example, above, the purpose of these investigations is to give an interpretation of these phenomena, to make sense of them, or to try at least to clarify them a little bit.

Because it is always very hard to make sense of what is happening *here and now*, without the clarifying distance in time and space, it is useful to draw on philosophical frameworks. Some philosophers are very

2 In a short introduction movie on the site of the Flemish governmental organisation *Kind en Gezin* (Child and Family) the message for parents is that this is an organization where everything is viewed from the standpoint of the child and the main idea is that children's development is stimulated (http://www.kindengezin.be/over-kind-en-gezin/ retrieved 23/05/2016).

3 I put 'natural' between quotation marks because ideas of intuitive or innate ways of raising children conceal the necessity of sense-making backgrounds, and this is something I emphatically want to problematize.

appealing, especially those who cannot only be placed in a broader hermeneutical tradition, but also, as Taylor points out in the next quotation, who accept the idea of a sense-making background as a necessary condition for making sense in the first place, in other words, who follow in the footsteps of Kant's transcendental deduction. The list of such philosophers includes Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and of course Taylor himself, and they are thus inherently critical of our predominant *disengaged* culture.

> Heidegger speaks of 'finitude' in his account of human being *(Dasein)*. Wittgenstein places the meanings of our words in the context of our form of life *(Lebensform)*. Both are therefore concerned with the context of intelligibility of knowledge, thought and meaning. Both propose some notion of background; and, more, both articulate some part of this background whose neglect has allowed the disengaged view to seem plausible. Articulation plays a crucial part in their argumentative strategy; it is central to the innovative force of their philosophy. There are therefore good reasons for mentioning them in the same breath, as there are for going back again and again to their arguments. What makes the latter so necessary is the hold of the disengaged view on our thought and culture, which has a lot to do, of course, with the hegemony of institutions and practices that require and entrench a disengaged stance: science, technology, rationalized forms of production, bureaucratic administration, a civilization committed to growth, and the like. The kind of thinking of which both are variants has a certain counter-cultural significance, an inherent thrust against the hegemonic forms of our time. (Taylor 1995b, 75-76)

If our late modern Western culture is indeed taken over by a disengaged stance, and if this is also the case as far as parenting is concerned, then this means that it is no longer clear that a background is required to make sense of things. But how can we conceive of parenting outside of sense-giving contexts? Doesn't education always presuppose a broader cultural context? Doesn't it presuppose parents

who act out of particular interests and their own moral and other backgrounds? And isn't the child also 'thrown' into the world, with its peculiarities. And what about the expert? Isn't (s)he a concrete (wo) man of flesh and blood, with her or his own stories and history? Can we really find traces of the disengaged stance, of this tendency to decontextualize, in the all too human domain of childrearing and education? This is the overall conjecture: even the domain of the very subjective, lived experiences of being a mother or a father, is at least affected, and maybe even colonized, by the disengaged scientific stance.

General outline

Chapter One revisits Furedi's *Paranoid Parenting* (2001a, 2001b, 2008). In that book the sociologist Furedi describes a parenting culture that puts parents under all kinds of pressures, and he offers the parents he addresses, after giving them the necessary insights into the mechanisms at work, no choice other than to opt out, and to withdraw. Furedi can be regarded as the exception to the rule that parents are seen as in need of support, or at least in need of parenting experts. In Furedi's account the societal level with its *parenting culture* is conceived of as hostile. The problem I have with this position is that it seems to be paranoid too. To develop this argument from a hermeneutical perspective I first draw on Heidegger to distinguish between two ways of being social that are elaborated in *Being and Time*. People, and thus parents, can be social in an *inter*personal manner, as well as in an *im*personal manner. The latter is an *existentiale* better known as 'das Man' or the 'Anyone'. By conceiving it as an *existentiale*, it is conceived as belonging to *Dasein*, and is no longer seen as an external 'causal' factor. Although, and this is a further distinction, 'what they say' or 'das Man' is mostly seen, also by Heidegger, as something normatively negative, in connection with the idea of (in)authenticity, Heidegger also develops it, be it in a rather preliminary fashion, as constitutive of our self-understanding as social beings. Still, although Heidegger opens the route to engagement and a reclaiming of ownership

of one's own community or society, it is Taylor who takes the further step by conceiving of the community as constitutive of the individual, 'in the sense that the self-interpretations which define him are drawn from the interchange which the community carries on' (1985, 8). Taylor believes we are dependent upon a community or society, but remarks that this dependence is too often seen as causal, and not as 'touching our very identity' (ibid.). It is this hermeneutical idea of our self-interpretations being dependent upon our community, that allows us to see parents as actors who can take responsibility for their community or society.

After writing this chapter, two issues still remained to be considered: first it seemed a bit naïve to believe that parents really would take the initiative to gather and to scrutinize the possible ways of being a parent in the ways offered by our social normativity, as I contend in the final part of the first chapter, although it wasn't clear at the time why this suggestion seemed so unworldly. Second, Heidegger proved to be less helpful in understanding our *late modern* predicament, in his stating that *Dasein* by no means can be regarded as an *object*. In that sense Heidegger seems far more radical than Taylor, for whom '(wo) man' is part of a mechanist universe, while on the other hand (s)he doesn't converge or coincide with it. Taylor revisits Heidegger, one could say, in the sense that he allows for an explicit morality, whereas Heidegger notoriously refused that (cf. Polt 1999, 169-171), and Taylor seems to be more tolerant of the ambiguity and paradox in our late modern cultures. Instead of, as Heidegger does, radically criticizing the scientization and rationalization of our self-understanding, Taylor tries to understand for instance how on the one hand, we can ontologically be beings who cannot exist unless as social beings, but that we on the other hand are contingently capable of denying this, and of valuing our individuality so highly. Instead of denouncing this as inauthenticity, or as 'not owned' ways of self-understanding, Taylor will try to understand how these ways of self-understanding have become valued by us.

Another example of such a paradox is to be found in certain parenting manuals and websites: in the (co-authored) *Chapter Two* we started our investigation with the perplexity caused by the idea that parents were supposed to accept without questioning that they (as human beings) would treat themselves and their child(ren) as *exclusively* belonging to a causal-mechanist universe. Since both authors of this co-authored chapter are fathers, we could ask explicitly from a first person perspective: *Can I, as a father, conceive of my son first and foremost as a developing neurological organism? Can I see myself as a father who gives his son an oxytocin shot by hugging him, or can I understand myself as a father whose relationship with his son is first and foremost endocrinological?* These questions arose from our reading science- or rather brain-based parenting manuals, which seemed to take these possibilities for granted. This means that parents are construed as Taylorian *strong figures of disengagement*, who act in a way that is disconnected from moral and other sense giving contexts.

The point made in this chapter is that it would be wrong to radically oppose the idea that parents use scientific insights or evidence while bringing up their children, since parents often have become such figures of disengagement. They should however not be conceived of as figures of disengagement in a *strong* sense, meaning that they have really left behind any moral or other background, but rather as figures of *weak* disengagement, meaning that they still have, and act from, moral and other backgrounds. For instance, because for them to draw on a scientific approach of parenting is strongly valued. We thus hold a plea for a middle way between a Heideggerian rejection of an objectifying scientific approach of parenting on the one hand and a complete endorsing of the idea of 'scientific parenting' (Sunderland, Letourneau) on the other because paradoxes are typical of our late modern condition, for instance the idea that we can (only) make sense of things by stepping out of all sense giving and thus subjective backgrounds. We use Taylor to try to account for these paradoxes, that are typical of our late-modern condition. They can be hard to bear. Once we cannot stand the tension any longer we tend to simplify our world

by choosing only one possibility. Another example of such a paradox in our late-modern society is that we demand that persons must be unique individuals in order to be accepted socially. Instead of bearing this ambiguity, we have a tendency to become individualists, and forget it is a social requirement. In the case of scientific parenting, our Taylor reading suggests it might be better indeed to endure this tension, instead of giving in to it and taking sides in this discussion, and for instance rejecting our valuing of scientific resources. But maybe more revealing is the fact that to reinterpret parents as figures of disengagement in a *weak* sense of the word, signifies they are conceived again as *full-blown* moral beings, that deserve to be treated as such, whereas there seems to be a tendency not to treat parents as such.

Chapter Two shows that it is no longer possible in our late modern western societies to conceive of parenting without a cultural background that endorses science and its values. A scientific outlook belongs to our sense-making backgrounds.

Chapter Three engages with this question by looking into what I refer to as the 'liminality' of certain propositions, that I found in a popular and bestselling parenting manual, *The Whole-brain Child. 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind* (Siegel and Bryson 2012). I draw here on Wittgenstein's later philosophy, especially *On Certainty* and *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. By accepting the fact that certain propositions, that claim to be mirroring timeless features of our world, are in fact liminal, being not empirical, nor methodological or framework propositions, but betwixt and between empirical and methodological, they are exposed as temporal, as situated, as contingent. Of course, one could object that propositions that are actually mirroring nature could also be liminal, in the sense that many still contest their truth. But for the later Wittgenstein, the picture theory of language – that he adhered to in his *Tractatus* – cannot but be wrong, so the whole idea of mirroring nature is unacceptable. Our framework propositions, once they have become part of what Wittgenstein calls 'the scaffolding of our thoughts' (1969,

§211), provide us with ways of seeing things, that become very hard to resist, and that can become even very hard to notice and to articulate, as *On Certainty* reveals. Instead of providing parents with the latest scientific insights or findings, parents, I argue, are rather initiated into new ways of conceiving of themselves and their children and of the nature of parenting.

But this being initiated is connected with the idea of liminality: only when certain propositions are accepted by parents and others as being beyond doubt, has a process of initiation in the sense Cavell gives to it been accomplished: the ontology has changed, new 'objects' are to be found, such as for instance 'attachment' or 'interactions'. Only then they belong to 'the scaffolding of our thoughts'. Or maybe what Taylor recently has called 'the whole range of footings that come about in human culture' (2016, 35). Since all this happens as it were behind parents' backs, this again is reminiscent of a broader cultural phenomenon of infantilization that Susan Neiman (2014) warns us of. Maybe it is this picture 'that holds us captive', and that makes the whole idea of parents gathering and talking of what they value in their culture or in parenting manuals etc. seem so naïve. Dreyfus and Taylor refer to Wittgenstein's (1958, I, §115) frequently quoted simile

> A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seems to repeat it to us inexorably.

They explain how powerful such pictures can be.

> What he is referring to is the powerful picture of mind-in-world which inhabits and underlies what we could call the modern epistemological tradition, which begins with Descartes. The point he wants to convey with the use of the word 'picture' (*Bild*) is that there is something here different and bigger than a theory. It is a largely unreflected-upon background understanding which provides the context for, and thus influences all our theorizing in, this area. (Dreyfus and Taylor, 2015, 1)

In Chapter Four I start from two observations: (1) that the parenting account as it stands is a frictionless fiction that makes a very strong appeal to many of us, denizens of late modern Western societies; and (2) that there is an overall agreement that parents *qua parents* are, almost by definition, in need of support, and hence there is a genuine parental deficit. I argue that the technical conception of parenting (support) picks out or defines a very specific kind of deficit, a shortage of practical and theoretical knowledge, and that the void can be filled by supplying parents with the missing information. This needs to be distinguished from another kind of deficit, that is for instance spelled out by Ramaekers and Suissa (2012), drawing upon Cavell, and that is related to the hermeneutical deficit. I will make the same movement the other way around and will try to articulate what kind of support parents need when we depart from this kind of deficit. What kind of support does this specific deficit pick out or define? This will lead to a preliminary conceptualization of the parent counsellor as a figure of *strong* engagement, allowing for parental momentum, or a condition where the friction of being a parent is accepted as such.

In the *Conclusion* I bring the different threads together and I develop a distinction between an *ethics of causality* and an *ethics of hermeneutics* in the broad field of initiatives that purport to support parents. The issue becomes then why an ethics of hermeneutics would be preferable?

CHAPTER 1

Parenting support and the role of society in parental self-understanding: Furedi's *Paranoid Parenting* revisited

Parenting support and the role of society in parental self-understanding: Furedi's *Paranoid Parenting* revisited[4]

The last two decades have witnessed a growing attention to parenting issues originating from a broad range of professional fields: journalism (e.g. Schaubroek 2010; Hodgkinson 2010 and Bristow 2009), social work (e.g. Van der Pas 2003), politics and policy making, sociology (Furedi 2001b and 2008), developmental psychology, literature (e.g. Shriver 2003) and poetry (e.g. Dove 1995), child psychiatry (e.g. Adriaenssens 2007 and 2010), the advertising industry, moral philosophy (e.g. Burggraeve 2006) and last but not least philosophy of education (among others: Suissa 2006; Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007; Ramaekers 2010; Ramaekers and Suissa 2010 and 2012; Smeyers 2010 and Smith 2010). Concern for these parenting issues takes very different forms: research centres (for instance the *Centre for Parenting Culture Studies* at the university of Kent, or *Parenthood and Professional Work with Parents* at Leiden University of Applied Sciences (see Weille 2011)), books, newspaper articles, TV programmes, magazines, websites, iPods, columns, laws, policy documents, research programs, parent training programs (e.g. Triple P), papers in magazines, websites for parents (e.g. attachmentparenting.com) and so on and so on. In short, parenting issues seem to be omnipresent.

4 This chapter is a slightly revised version of the article with the same title that has been published in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 47, 3, 2013, 391-406.

In this chapter, I want to focus on the recent tendency to support parents by critically looking at the impact this huge interest in parenting matters has on parents themselves. For instance Hodgkinson (2010) believes that parents are exhausted and Schaubroeck (2010) argues that parents are always prone to feel guilty. With the publication of his *Paranoid Parenting* (2001b and 2008), sociologist Frank Furedi became trend-setting. Furedi not only diagnoses and analyses parents' alleged predicament as a lack of confidence induced by society, but in similar ways to Schaubroeck and Hodgkinson, he addresses parents directly, and wants to help them out. Furedi hopes that what he views as a disempowering of parents can be put to an end, if only parents gain some insight – that he willingly provides – into the cultural mechanisms that are responsible for their lack of confidence. Despite the quality of his analyses, I believe his view is problematic. The main problem, in my view, is that underlying his sketch a metaphysics is at work that denies parents an important aspect of normal human agency. I want to argue that casting the parenting predicament in the terms Furedi uses paradoxically adds to the disempowerment of parents. I draw on a hermeneutical perspective to show this and in doing so, I will try to amend Furedi's one-sided picture of what he believes to be supportive to parents, to open up a new perspective on the idea of parent support.

Parenting today: problems, diagnosis and remedy according to Furedi

Furedi offers a sharp analysis of the predicament parents find themselves in nowadays. Parents, he argues, cannot escape the predominant culture of 'paranoid parenting'. Furedi describes paranoid parenting as a parental condition of which the distinctive feature is *a lack of confidence* (1) of parents in themselves, (2) of parents in other adults and vice versa, and (3) of policy makers and experts towards parents. This paranoia leads to phenomena such as 'over-parenting' and 'parent-blaming'.

Paranoid parenting is not about parents, but about *a culture* of paranoid parenting.

> This is a culture that continually incites the public to worry about every dimension of children's lives. It is a culture that dramatizes every issue facing mothers and fathers and turns everyday problems into scare stories. It is also a culture that denigrates parental competence and insists that mothers and fathers cannot cope without the help of experts. These cultural messages are zealously promoted by a formidable network of professional experts, child rearing gurus, child protection advocates, fear entrepreneurs and politicians.' (Furedi, 2008, 16)

Although Furedi deals with such diverse issues as the impact of the cultural dogmas of child determinism and parental determinism, the phenomenon of the professionalization of parents, the growing politicization of parenting, the absence of a relevant moral outlook for parents, etc., all allegedly contributing to the above described lack of confidence, everything in his book eventually boils down to cultural pressures.

Despite Furedi's choice of a psychiatric metaphor – paranoia being a condition that places the sufferer in the middle of a closed universe, where every event, however meaningless it may seem to an outsider, is imbued with an inescapable and distressing self-referential significance – he remains hopeful:

> Of course we do not have to fatalistically give in to these forces. Although parents cannot opt out of the culture they inhabit they can challenge it. And if we understand the forces at work then at least we can learn to believe in ourselves and in other adults in the community.' (ibid., 16)

In his conclusion he writes:

> (…) if parents can grasp why parenting has been turned into such a troublesome enterprise, then they can do something about regaining their self-confidence. Today's parenting culture systematically de-skills mothers and fathers. It places enormous pressure on parents to turn away from what only they can do. The good news is that if parents understand the pressures that bear down upon them, they can insulate themselves from it. They may still be anxious about their children's well-being, but at least it will be possible to put those fears into a more balanced perspective. (ibid., 197)

Furedi supplies parents with further advice. They would do better to listen to their own instinct than to professional advice or even advice of friends (ibid., 196-7) and they should create little communities of stakeholders in their children's welfare (ibid., 196).[5]

I believe that this account, however attractive and convincing it may seem, contains some serious shortcomings. First it strikes me that society or the cultural domain as a whole is seen here as purely suppressive. To stretch the paranoia metaphor a bit further, parents are disconnected from their society. Society is out of reach. It has become a source of hostile forces that is crushing parents. Below I introduce some elements of a Heideggerian hermeneutics to throw another light on what is happening here. Furedi's analyses are reminiscent of the negative role *das Man* (the 'they'), at least at first glance, plays in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. However, for Heidegger the role given to *das Man* in his fundamental analysis of Dasein is not solely negative. Second Furedi puts a lot of emphasis on insight. Parents should adopt an

5 Similar analyses and remedies can be found in Schaubroeck (2010). This Belgian journalist has interviewed parents about feelings of guilt. She stresses the fact that parents feel responsible and guilty due to the enormous expectations society has towards them (41). She for instance asks child rearing experts to be less optimistic about the possibilities of education. She applauds all kinds of activities that can help parents to meet each other and she thus elaborates Furedi's idea of creating a community that can provide practical and emotional support (238-239 and 241). The British journalist Hodgkinson also attaches importance to the idea of parents giving each other practical support (2010, 29 and 98-99).

external sociological point of view. Parents need to gain insight into the cultural mechanisms but can they ever be outsiders towards their own culture? And is this only a matter of cognitive insight? To deal with this issue I will use Charles Taylor's concept of atomism that will help to problematize the idea that parents can be conceived of as being able to step outside their own culture. Third, Furedi is very optimistic about the instinctive knowhow parents possess. Again Taylor's criticism of atomism will be very useful in trying to show why this position is untenable.

Fourth, one possible way out of the alleged parental predicament consists, for Furedi, in the creation of a community of fellow-parents. Hence problems that in Furedi's account originate in the community on the level of society are dealt with at the level of a community of partners or companions (maybe even fellow-victims). To resolve the disconnectedness from society, parents have to connect with each other. But will this not enlarge the feelings of paranoia towards society? Are these levels not at a too great distance in Furedi's account?

A hermeneutical approach of the cultural domain (1): Heidegger on parental self-understanding

In division I of *Being and Time* Heidegger develops a fundamental analysis of Dasein (being a human being). From this hermeneutical perspective, the broad social or cultural domain is not something we can objectify, in fact it is not a *thing* at all, it is an *existentiale of Dasein*; a way of making sense of one's being, or a mode of self-understanding. To get more of a grip on Furedi's understanding of the social, and why I believe it is problematic, I want to introduce two distinctions that are inherent in Heidegger's existentialist phenomenology[6] in

6 I am fully aware of the fact that Heidegger later on rejected the idea that his *Being and Time* was about existential phenomenology (see e.g. his *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger 2008, 231-232). But still I believe that precisely Heidegger's existential phenomenology can throw a new light on some problems we deal with in this chapter.

Being and Time, namely: (1) the distinction between (inter)personal and impersonal ways of being social and (2) on the impersonal level we can distinguish between a constitutive and a normative way of being social.

On being social

The first distinction Heidegger makes quite explicitly by treating the question of the 'who' of Dasein in two *different* paragraphs of division I, chapter 4 of *Being and Time*. Heidegger elaborates on a quality (existentiale) of Dasein he mentioned earlier[7], viz. that Dasein is in each case mine (*Jemeinigkeit*). Heidegger wants to know 'who' Dasein is and (§25) rhetorically asks if possibly Dasein is proximally and for the most time [zunächst und zumeist] *not itself*. 'Who' we are in our everydayness is worked out in the two following paragraphs. In my reading of the text, drawing on Blattner (2006), Heidegger gives an account of the way Dasein is a social being. The first distinction is about *how* we are social beings. That man is a social being is widely accepted. But the distinction Heidegger draws is that we are social beings at the same time in a personal way as well as in an impersonal manner, respectively analyzed in §26 and 27. Starting from the Heideggerian idea that people share a common intelligibility (Blattner, 2006, 73), we could look at parental self-understanding from two different, though not entirely separate, points of view.

On the one hand, according to Heidegger, we are social beings in a way that we care for others, because our self-understanding is interwoven with that of others. Heidegger uses the word solicitude (*Fürsorge*) to indicate this form of care, not for equipment, but care for other beings of the type of Dasein. Following Heidegger (2001, 159) 'Da-sein must always be seen as being-in-the-world, as concern for things, and as caring for other [Da-seins], as the being-with the human

7 In §9.

beings it encounters, and never as a self-contained subject.' 'Solicitude' is just a technical term for the way others matter to us simply in so far as we lead our own lives (Blattner, 2006, 67). This of course, does not mean that Dasein always or even mostly cares for others in a morally outstanding manner. So we are social beings in an (inter)personal way. Parents understand themselves mostly as living at least partly for the sake of their children. Parents meet other parents. Parents also meet other people, e.g. teachers, through the fact that they have children. It is this kind of self-understanding that can amount to the creation of an interpersonal community, an idea touched upon by Furedi, Schaubroeck and Hodgkinson[8], where people have common purposes, common interests and where people know each other by sight.

On the other hand however, Heidegger points out another way of being social, and so another way of self-understanding, that is impersonal. Blattner (ibid., 69) claims that Heidegger's concern (in division I, chapter 4) is to establish that what and how things are an issue for us, or matter to us, is governed by the social patterns in which we live, the patterns of social normativity. This impersonal way of being social implies that we mostly do things in the way others do, without knowing who these others are, because they are not known to us (by sight). The 'they' is faceless, so to speak (Heidegger 1962, 164).

As Blattner (2006, 68) remarks, the 'they' or the 'Anyone' (das Man) is not a community in the sense that communitarians would use the term. I believe it is, rather, a community in the sense some Wittgensteinian scholars give to the word[9]. We might say that this kind of community is not a community we have created, but a community that has formed us or that at least strongly informs our acting and thinking[10]. So we understand ourselves because there is this shared intelligibility.

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8 See note 5.

9 E.g. Meredith Williams (1999).

10 The following quote is a rare reference in *Being and Time* to the process of initiation in one's culture: 'This everyday way in which things have been interpreted is one in which Dasein has grown in the first instance, with never a possibility of extrication' (Heidegger 1962, 213).

Or, as Blattner (ibid., 73-74) puts it: ' [Heidegger] described the social dimension of the world and the way in which we Dasein are in the first instance Anyone-selves, that is, selves who understand ourselves primarily by way of the public articulation of the world.' In other words: *das Man* is an existentiale of Dasein.

Normativity versus constitutivity (of our self-understanding as social beings)

The second distinction I would like to introduce is one drawn less clearly by Heidegger himself. The 'they'/'Anyone' can be construed as a *normative* 'community' that puts pressure on people to behave as others ('they') do, but also as a *constitutive* 'community' that provides the ways one does things or one understands oneself, in the normal course of things. On the one hand the 'they' constitutes what we do, so without this background we wouldn't be able to do anything that would make sense and we would not be able to make sense of others. On the other hand it puts us under pressure to behave like 'normal' persons do. In Blattner's (2006, 71) words: '(…) the same forces that keep human life recognizable to us all around here and allow us to understand one another without further ado generate a form of conformism and social suppression.'

One might easily overlook the passages where Heidegger treats the 'they' in a positive manner. Following Blattner (2006, 69), the next passage can be taken as being about the constitutivity of the 'they' (*das Man*):

> We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they [man]* take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *they* shrink back; we find 'shocking' what *they* find shocking. The 'they', which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness. The 'they' has its own ways in which to be. (Heidegger 1962, 164)

Blattner (2006, 69-70) explains how these patterns of social normativity prescribe how to *do* things or to *be* for example a teacher (or a father).

> There are ways to hammer, ways to drive, ways to drink coffee, and ways to be a teacher. Proximally and for the most part we do things the way one does them. Because that man is drinking a coffee as one drinks coffee, his presence is unobtrusive, obvious. I 'know what he is doing', because he is doing it as one does it. If he is drinking coffee abnormally (say he is lying on the floor of the coffee house while he drinks), then he obtrudes, stands out, and requires interpretation.

We can elaborate on this by adding that not only do I know 'what others are doing' simply because they are doing it the way one does it, but I also know what I am doing because I am doing it the way one does it. So I agree to the patterns of social normativity that are dominant in our culture. In other words, to be able to make sense of myself, I need the 'they'.

It is much easier to detect the other type of the 'they,' i.e. the normative one, in *Being and Time*, since, as Blattner (2006, 70) points out, Heidegger does not merely note the existence of social normativity, he investigates phenomenologically how it functions. So we human beings, according to Heidegger, understand ourselves as being concerned about not being at too great a distance from others. We prefer not to attract too much attention. This averageness has, curiously enough, a disburdening function for Dasein.

> Yet, because the 'they' presents every judgment and decision as its own, it deprives the particular Dasein of its answerability. The 'they' can, as it were, manage to have 'them' constantly invoking it. (…) it 'was' always the "they" who did it, and yet it can be said that it has been 'no one'. (…) Thus the particular Dasein in its everydayness is disburdened by the 'they'. Not only that; by thus

> disburdening it of its Being, the 'they' accommodates Dasein [kommt . . . dem Dasein entgegen] if Dasein has any tendency to take things easily and make them easy. And because the 'they' constantly accommodates the particular Dasein by disburdening it of its Being, the 'they' retains and enhances its stubborn dominion. (Heidegger 1962, 165)

We can conclude that for Heidegger, constitutivity and normativity are two sides of the same coin. The one can't exist without the other, but we can of course look at the 'they' from one perspective at a time.

Heidegger's ambiguity towards the 'they' (das Man)

It is interesting however to see that Heidegger takes a rather ambiguous stand towards 'the they'. On the one hand '*das Man*' is understood as a necessary and positive existentiale or a distinguishing mark of Dasein or the being of a human being (see e.g. Heidegger, 1962, 167), on the other hand Heidegger often writes about 'the they' in a condescending manner although he denies this tendency.

> (Our) own Interpretation is purely ontological in its aims, and is far removed from any moralizing critique of everyday Dasein, and from the aspirations of a 'philosophy of culture'. (ibid., 210-211 [167])

Why is Heidegger not neutral about the 'they' as he probably should be if he stuck to his ontological programme? Was he not trying to investigate what the meaning of being is? I am drawing attention to this because of an interesting similarity with Furedi here. As pointed out, Furedi is also rather critical towards the 'they' or, our culture. And in being so critical he tends to neglect the necessity of the constitutivity of our culture. Heidegger on the other hand is not purely negative towards *das Man*, and so ultimately does not neglect the constitutivity of our culture (the 'they').

It is important to notice that for Heidegger, there is a tendency towards superficiality that is inherent in the being of Dasein, as evident in his 1929 inaugural address *What is metaphysics? (Was ist Metaphysik?)* Discussing anxiety, Heidegger argues that the tendency of human beings to turn away from being (the nothing) and to lose themselves in public superficiality protects them from facing their anxiety. But it is precisely this tendency that is typical for the nothing (the being) itself. The nothing (being) itself is what makes the transcendence possible. Without the nothing there would be no beings to meet in the world. This openness always implies that one becomes absorbed by the world.

> And yet this constant if ambiguous turning away from the nothing accords, within certain limits, with the most proper significance of the nothing. In its nihilation the nothing directs us precisely toward beings. (Heidegger 2008, 104)

So here Heidegger seems to accept Dasein's tendency towards superficiality. Blattner (2006) sums up different reasons why Heidegger nevertheless remained ambiguous towards this tendency of Dasein. Probably Heidegger's existentialist philosophy and / or personal morality was in tension with his ontological project[11]. Whatever the case, one

11 Blattner (2006, 129) makes the following remark: '(-) Heidegger held a dim view of everyday life in the early twentieth century. Perhaps Heidegger really meant to describe everyday life as egregiously leveled down and disowned, not unlike the way Kierkegaard and Nietzsche often characterize contemporary life. Most people, according to Nietzsche, belong to the "herd," the weak-willed and unimaginative mass of humanity that does as it is told and tries not to rock the boat. The herd has no taste and no ability to tell what is great from what is ordinary. Nietzsche's rhetoric dovetailed with the revulsion of the German "mandarins" to Weimar culture. Although Heidegger himself was a small-town, lower middle-class boy, and therefore not a member of the Mandarin class, he seems to have had sympathy for the Mandarin critique of the decadence of modern urban life. Kierkegaard's concern was less with greatness, taste and decadence, than with one's ability to rise above the ethical and rational demands of common sense and communal life and commit oneself to a singular, life-defining project, as Abraham did. The reason to mention this existentialist reaction to modern life is that in some passages in Being and Time Heidegger appears to endorse elements of Nietzsche's, Kierkegaard's, and the Mandarins' rhetoric. In the grip of such rhetoric, Heidegger may have wanted to assimilate average everyday Dasein to something less admirable, something lower. Seeing philosophically that this is implausible, Heidegger always moderates his critiques with assurances that his characterizations are not meant to be disparaging and that he is describing a "positive" existential phenomenon. The assurances ring hollow, however, in proximity to all the rhetoric.'

might consider this ambiguity a good reason to believe that the' they' for Heidegger can and should not be reduced to a purely negative phenomenon.

Authentic and inauthentic ways of self-understanding

Sharp as his analyses may be, from this Heideggerian perspective we can point out two human possibilities that are not mentioned in Furedi's account. First, the 'they' can have a disburdening effect on parents and second, anxiety can be conceived as an opportunity to live a more owned or authentic life[12]. Let us first look at the possible disburdening function of the 'they'. When we look at parents as human beings who are always trying to make sense of who they are, then we can understand that they sometimes become anxious when experiencing the feeling that they are not coping with what seems manageable for other parents. When 'they say/one says' that parents are ultimately responsible for the 'outcome' of education or the child rearing process (what Furedi calls the myth of parental determinism), it becomes understandable that parents feel guilty. What adds to the worries is of course the fact that the 'they' is not homogenous (anymore). Parents often do not know how to behave as 'good' or 'good enough' or 'effective' parents and the 'they' is much more varied than it probably was in for instance Heidegger's time. The pressure is coming from different angles as it were. It is precisely this that comes out in Furedi's analysis. It does

12 Following Blattner Heidegger never made up his mind whether Dasein that is immersed in 'the they' is just not authentic or, as Blattner translates the German word 'uneigentlich' as unowned, or whether it is a more degraded or disowned way of Dasein. Blattner formulates as a working hypothesis 'the suggestion that there are three modes of life. (...) The hypothesis, then, is this: We live to a large extent in a mode that is unowned. For many of us the wrenching existential challenges that Heidegger describes under the headings of "death" and "anxiety" have not arisen. We glide along through life without having to face the question whether to own our lives. When the existential challenges of death and anxiety do arise, however, we are confronted with a choice, whether to own or disown our lives. Heidegger's word for the disowning response is usually "flight". Disowned Dasein flees in the face of death and anxiety and tries to return to everyday life. Having been awakened to the existential challenges, however, one cannot return "naïvely" to everyday life. One must, rather, cover up or bury the existential challenges, and that involves disowning the sorts of entity we are.' (Blattner 2006, 130)

not seem to be disburdening at all. How could we make sense of the possible disburdening effect of the 'they'? It is easy to misinterpret Heidegger here. In the earlier mentioned quotation about the disburdening function of the 'they', he talks about Dasein that tries to take things easily and make them easy (Heidegger, 1962, 165). For Heidegger, in what some might call an elitist tendency, the 'they' helps parents to escape the possibilities that lie in anxiety and guilt. The anxiety and guilt Furedi mentions would be examples for Heidegger of fretting and worries about trivial ontic, instead of ontological, matters, and in that way the 'they' in his view uncomfortably blocks the road to anxiety and resoluteness. So in this Heideggerian sense the 'they' and the worries it brings with it, does play a disburdening role.

The second possibility Furedi misses, is favoured by Heidegger. Through anxiety, we can learn to understand ourselves in a way that is closer to the way we are ontologically. As Blattner says: through anxiety we don't learn *what* we are, but we come to see ourselves as *how* we are. And we are 'ability-to-be' (2006, 160). There is ultimately no-one who can tell us what we should do with our lives. Anxiety in Heidegger's *Being and Time* is a positive way of self-understanding. Anxiety, for Heidegger, paves the way to authenticity for Dasein. Guilt is a way of self-understanding that implies that we realize that whatever we do, there are always more decisions or choices we did not make. And also that since we're thrown (facticity), our range of possibilities is always limited. This guilt is a task, in which we have to persevere on the level of resoluteness. For Heidegger anxiety and guilt are of course not feelings, but rather ontological states that make these feelings possible. So from a hermeneutical Heideggerian perspective anxiety has got a more distinct positive dimension, i.e. that it is not only something negative, but can lead people to live a more owned or authentic life. In Furedi's account, anxiety is not at all seen as a way of self-understanding that could help people to see *how* they are, i.e. 'ability-to-be'. Neither is being anxious about concrete 'ontic matters' seen as disburdening and in that sense as a supportive possibility of

the 'they', since it reliefs parents (temporarily) of the sometimes heavy existential burden of leading their lives (as parents) authentically.

A hermeneutical approach of the cultural domain (2): Taylor on atomism and human agency

Let us take a look at the work of another philosopher whose views in some respect come close to Heidegger's. In Charles Taylor's post-Heideggerian hermeneutics (1985), (1) man[13] is conceived as a self-interpreting animal, and (2) society is deemed indispensable for a man to be a self-interpreting animal, i.e. for being human. Taylor believes that a fully competent human agent, i.e. a person or a self in the ordinary meaning, is partly constituted by the understanding he has of himself. What makes this self-understanding human is that it essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a background of 'strong evaluation', or as Taylor explains, 'a background of distinctions between things which are recognized as of categoric or unconditional or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this or are of lesser value' (ibid., 3). Full, normal human agency necessarily implies that 'certain questions of categoric value have arisen, and received at least partial answers' (ibid, 3). Taylor distinguishes between two possibilities: these answers can be given authoritatively by the culture or they can be elaborated in the deliberation by the person concerned. In any case they are his in the sense that they are incorporated into his self-understanding (ibid, 3).

But man is dependent upon the community and communities he belongs to. The issue our Heidegger reading evoked, namely whether society does have a positive function, is put aside by Taylor. Still, Taylor has something important to say about the kind of dependency the individual has on the community. In criticizing the 'disengaged

13 Taylor uses the gendered expression 'man' instead of '(wo)man'. I believe it is clear he means human beings regardless of sex or gender with the term 'man'.

identity' that is typically valued by moderns, Taylor believes the most negative feature of this stance is atomism. This is an understanding of the individual as metaphysically independent of society. Taylor holds that atomism 'hides from view the way an individual is constituted by the language and the culture which can only be maintained and renewed in the communities he is part of' (ibid, 8). Taylor (ibid, 8) explains why this is the case:

> The community is not simply an aggregation of individuals; nor is there simply a causal interaction between the two. The community is also constitutive of the individual, in the sense that the self-interpretations which define him are drawn from the interchange which the community carries on. A human being alone is an impossibility, not just *de facto*, but as it were *de jure*. Outside of the continuing conversation of a community, which provides the language by which we draw our background distinctions, human agency of the kind I describe above would be not just impossible, but inconceivable. As organisms we are separable from society – although it may be hard in fact to survive as a lone being; but as humans this separation is unthinkable. On our own, as Aristotle says, we would be either beasts or Gods.'

The consequence is that in order to have a full normal human agency, participating in the ongoing conversation of a community and thus dependence on a community is a necessary condition. According to Taylor we moderns do not in fact deny our dependence on society, but the problem is that this dependence is seen in causal terms, and not as touching our very identity (ibid, 8). Unlike Heidegger, Taylor does not hesitate to accept the constitutive aspects of society. On the other hand, both Heidegger and Taylor – as hermeneutical philosophers – shudder at the idea of humans being governed by causal forces.

Furedi's analyses revisited

Now we can take a closer look at some of the metaphysics that are (not) at work in Furedi's account. From a (post-) Heideggerian hermeneutical point of view Furedi objectifies *das Man* or in other words sees the broader community[14] as an object, as an external causal factor and not as an existentiale of Dasein (i.e. a distinguishing mark of the being of a human being). This means that our society, or the broader community, is conceived not only as something negative but, more seriously, that it remains *external to* parental self-understanding in the way this is conceived by Heidegger and Taylor. That is why Furedi believes parents can gain some intellectual (sociological) insight into these external forces, from an outsider's point of view. Heidegger could never regard Furedi's cultural influences as beings that are present-at-hand (objects) and have causal effects on parents, reducing the latter also to beings that are present-at-hand. So Heidegger's problem with this idea of parents being disengaged and disconnected from society would be that it comes with the high price of them becoming objectified themselves. It is important to notice that Heidegger does not even mention the idea of a community or society in *Being and Time*, averse as he is to the idea that a way of being of Dasein (existentiale) would be conceived of as an object and Dasein would become a being that is present-at-hand[15]. For Taylor, Furedi's approach would be an outstanding example of how atomism is embraced nowadays and how our dependency on a community in order to be a human agent is conceived of as an interaction with causal effects that do not touch our very identity.

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14 When I use the term 'society' or 'broader community', I do not suppose there is one monolithic cultural community; I mean the different impersonal cultural, linguistic etc. communities in which parents as social beings are already embedded. I interpret Heidegger's 'the they' in a Taylorian way, in the sense that there are many ongoing conversations parents take part in. And of course, next to that, parents are also part of *inter*personal communities, which means that they know the other members as it were by sight. These are explicitly not meant when I use the term 'broader community'.

15 Heidegger starts his *Zollikon Seminars* with a warning for his audience of psychiatrists that 'Human Dasein as a domain with the capacity for receiving-perceiving is never merely an object present-at-hand. On the contrary, it is not something which can be objectified at all under any circumstances.' (Heidegger 2001, 4, emphasis mine)

Disconnected as parents are from it, in Furedi's account society can never be a resource for parenting knowhow. So Furedi's idea that parenting is something one does instinctively should come as no surprise. Furedi claims that parents know all by themselves what to do[16]. Put in terms of our discussion of Heidegger and Taylor, there is no need for social constitutivity. So if Furedi ignores the above-discussed constitutive functioning of our culture he has to look for the positive aspects of parenting in the instinctive realm rather than in the public realm. Heidegger's distinctions help us to see that there is a one-sidedness in Furedi's approach, in the sense that he emphasises the normativity of the community (the normative functioning), without taking into account the need for a constitutive society or community (the constitutive functioning). For Furedi, it seems that everything would be all right if society would only leave these parents alone.

Furedi analyzes the problems attributed to parenthood on a fundamental level as cultural influences coming from the broader society (community), but he looks for a solution, at least in part, at the level of smaller and interpersonal communities. Why is this? The disengaged atomist view leads to the belief that parents and society are on the opposite sides of a fence or a wall. This means that parents have to deal with society as a whole, in which case 'fellow-victims' would do well to organize themselves and look for ways to support each other without the hope they could ever really change the way things are at the level of society. This is not to say that bringing parents together is

16 One could of course in a more sympathetic reading connect the idea of instinct not to nature in the sense of first nature, but to nature in the sense of second nature (e.g. Helen Reece in her review of *The Claims Of Parenting* (Ramaekers and Suissa 2012), source: http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/reviewofbooks_article/12153).
This would imply some sort of constitutivity. But the instinctive knowhow would still remain disconnected from a societal level in Furedi's view, at least in his book *Paranoid Parenting*, where this is very obvious, if one reads the following long quote (emphasis mine): 'In any case, most professional advice is at best good common sense or at worst someone's prejudice. (...) Experience indicates that today's authorative advice will probably be dismissed in five years as unenlightened opinion, so don't feel worried about not heeding it. The advice of friends and family members is likely to be far more relevant, since they are acquainted with your circumstances and actually know a bit about your child. *However in the end it is your call, so you might as well follow your instinct.* Be prepared to call the child expert's bluff' (Furedi 2008 196-7).

a bad thing to do, but it is not clear how this could help them out on the level of society putting pressure on them. One gets the impression that it rather enlarges the image of a powerful and hostile society. From a hermeneutical viewpoint, both impersonal and (inter)personal ways of being social originate in Dasein's self-understanding as a social being.

Since Furedi does not draw a distinction between the constitutive side of being (a) social (being) and the normative side of being (a) social (being) he cannot form the hypothesis that parenthood might be out of balance on a more fundamental level. Perhaps, indeed, there is an imbalance between the normative function of the broader anonymous community on the one hand and the constitutive function it has on the other. The anxiety Furedi describes and the feelings of guilt (Schaubroeck 2010) or exhaustion (Hodgkinson 2010) others write about, can be interpreted as ways of *self-understanding* that are symptomatic of having too many possibilities of understanding themselves as parents and not enough criteria to distinguish between different social articulations of how to be a good parent. Another way of putting this is to say that there is too much room for values others have concerning parenting (even if they deny that their approaches are value-laden, as many scientific accounts actually do), but that parents on the other hand seem to have not enough space at all to try to find out what they value themselves as parents.

A new perspective on parenting support

Furedi's *Paranoid Parenting*, for all its merits, shows how an uncritical embracing of a modernist atomist view of human agency leads us astray, when we are trying to conceive of the idea of parenting support. Furedi's overstrained atomism leads to a very negative conception of parenting support indeed. The default position seems to be one that distrusts our culture, that a priori distrusts every expert, that encourages parents to join each other and give each other support, but

this always against the background of a hostile society. When, instead of seeing the individual (parent) as opposed to an anonymous society, we conceive of parents or other individuals as human beings that always try to make sense of their lives in terms of the social articulations that are available, we can start to treat them as full human agents; not just subject to forces coming from a massive society, and not only able to reflect upon their lives and actions, but in fact constantly doing so. Following the hypothesis that parents are not given the room to reflect on the values that are inherent in the cultural messages Furedi believes they constantly receive, and accepting the Heideggerian idea that das Man, or our culture, is not some 'thing' that lies outside our self-understanding as a causal factor, into which we can gain insight, in such a manner that we can liberate ourselves from it, but accepting that cultural pressures can be seen as possible ways of understanding oneself as a parent[17], the problem can then be considered not just in terms of a hostile society or culture versus a lonely parent, but , I believe, as first and foremost in terms of whether I, as a parent, can live with the idea that this is happening in *my* society; or, in other words, whether I can live with the idea that this is the kind of parent I would want to be. Furedi clearly does not want to look at himself as a parent who deeply distrusts other parents and adults. It is because he is connected with (and not disengaged from) his society that he protests. Yet it is exactly this connectedness that is cast aside in Furedi's *Paranoid Parenting*. From a hermeneutical point of view, it is my self-understanding and my ability to be at the level of the anonymous society that gets challenged. From a causal-mechanistic point of view, in a certain sense what is happening has nothing to do with who I am, and who I want to be.

This is highly reminiscent of Cavell's idea of philosophy as the education of grownups, in which there is no fundamental gap between the

17 E.g. in the example Furedi gives on his website of a parent getting mad at the lifeguard who forbids her to take a photograph of her child in the swimming pool (http://www.frankfuredi.com/index.php/site/article/272 retrieved on July 5, 2012).

personal and the impersonal and these levels of sense-making can be brought together:

> In philosophizing I have to bring my own language and life into imagination. What I require is a convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me. This seems to me a task that warrants the name philosophy. It is also the description of something we might call education. (…) In this light philosophy becomes the education of grownups. (…) The anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education. And for grownups this is not natural growth, but *change*. Conversion is a turning of our natural reactions; so it is symbolized as rebirth. (Cavell 1999 [1979], 125)

This is not to say that parent support, whatever form it takes, should be a kind of philosophizing, but this is to say that it at least should allow parents the possibility to articulate (imagine, put into words) what they themselves value in their culture. There is at least one form of parenting support conceivable along these lines that would allow such a connection between the personal and impersonal levels of community. Parents could gather with other parents to help each other to make sense of their lives by looking from close quarters at how they actually understand themselves in the ways our social normativity provides for. Perhaps they could find out together which of the culturally prescribed ways of 'parenting' are valued by themselves. This could be another good reason to create a community of parents, alongside the reasons mentioned by Furedi, Schaubroeck and Hodgkinson[18]. And although at first glance this new proposal does not seem that different from what these authors propose, I believe that it could

18 See note 5.

make a huge difference because it would not only give parenting issues back to parents, but it would also let them take responsibility for their own (broader) community *qua community* and connect them in this way with *their* (broader) community.

CHAPTER 2

Figures of disengagement: Charles Taylor, scientific parenting, and the paradox of late-modernity

Figures of disengagement: Charles Taylor, scientific parenting, and the paradox of late-modernity[19]

Introduction: the parenting paradox

In this chapter we want to approach the new science-informed parenting account from a hermeneutical perspective, because we believe it can help us to get a grip on at least some aspects of our late-modern condition. In this first section we articulate what is at stake. Since the 1970s 'parenting' has become a major issue in Western societies. It has been remarked that this growing public interest in child rearing is underpinned by parental determinism, or 'the assumption that there is a direct causal link between the quality of parenting and social outcomes' (Lee, Bristow, Faircloth, and Macvarish 2014, 3).[20] Low-quality parenting is presumed to be the source of all kinds of problems. For instance, the founders of the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) believe that mental health problems as well as social and economic problems can be traced back to the parent-child relationship (Sanders, Markie-Dadds and Turner 2003). Consequently, so the reasoning goes,

19 This chapter is a slightly revised version of the article, co-authored by Stefan Ramaekers, that has been published in *Educational Theory, Vol. 64, 6, 2014, 607-625*. No changes were made apart from some small corrections and a changing of references into APA style.

20 The authors of this work define 'parental determinism' as follows: 'a form of deterministic thinking that construes the everyday activities of parents as directly and causally associated with 'failing' or harming children, and so the wider society'; they further state that it is precisely the project of their research centre to 'understand better the roots and trajectory of parental determinism' (ibid., 3). See also Furedi 2008.

the reverse (namely good or high-quality parenting), understood in a particular way, is a panacea. For example, Nicole Letourneau, who holds a chair in research on parent-infant mental health, states that a strong, positive parent-infant relationship can help prevent alcoholism, obesity, heart disease, depression, and cancer (Letourneau 2013, 237). Similarly, children's psychologist Margot Sunderland names anxiety (attacks), depression, rage, bullying, aggression, addiction to alcohol, smoking, and drugs as possible problems good parenting can prevent (Sunderland 2006, 10-11). She claims that 'If we act upon what science can tell us about parenting, we can develop more benign societies (ibid., 6)'. Policymakers welcome this causal relationship between bad parenting and poor outcomes because intervening in the familial sphere is considered a more straightforward process than attempting to deal with wider social and economic issues (Lee et al. 2014, ix). In this sense policymakers reinforce the importance attributed to the causal relationship between what parents do and 'outcomes' in their children.

So good parenting is not based on instincts, but has to be backed up scientifically (Lee et al. 2014, ix and Ramaekers and Suissa 2012). Scientists and experts are required to show parents how to parent their children. The bottom line is simple: parenting, if and only if it is backed up scientifically, can and will prevent all kinds of problems, be it on the individual level, on an interpersonal level, or on the level of society. From this point of view, parents have good reasons to take a scientific approach in dealing with their children and their parenting.

Where earlier forms of parenting support – including Triple P, for example – were informed by psychology, the new scientific parenting discourse is informed by 'harder' sciences, such as neurobiology, endocrinology, and epigenetics. Jan Macvarish remarks that 'brain claims' are emphasizing the extreme vulnerability of the infant brain and thus raising the stakes of parenting and making the idea of 'parental determinism' even more concrete (McVarish 2014, 165). Take, for example,

Letourneau's description of causal mechanisms parents themselves are not aware of:

> Parental interaction stimulates the development of key circuitry in the infant brain, among them the dopamine response system and the HPA axis responsible, as you know, for regulating our response to stress. Think of Meany's rats: less licking and grooming resulted in poorly regulated, oversensitive stress response systems. The dopamine pleasure-reward system is no different. A lack of parental warmth leaves a child's dopamine receptors stunted and weak, and an outside stimulus becomes the only way he or she can jumpstart them (Letourneau 2013, 189-190).

'Parental influence' has a causal meaning in this account and functions in an explanatory way. This means that what happens between parents and their children can be described in a correct and precise way by an outsider, without checking with the insiders. 'Understanding' is completely disposed of and replaced by 'explaining'. This is clearly one of the reasons parents cannot turn to more intuitive or commonsense ideas about raising their children: they have no access to the significant causal mechanisms. Necessary parenting knowledge just is not accessible to them.

Furthermore, authors like Sunderland and Letourneau present this harder scientific stance as the default position for parenting[21]. This idea(l) of good parenting is more than just a new framework for coming to a better understanding of the more or less problematic behavior of children. Parents are supposed to accept these handbooks as providing a framework and guideline for every parental action. This account is pervasive: there are no limits to its application; there are no exceptions. It is not seen as a perspective or approach that parents can adhere to in case of trouble; rather, a good

21 See for instance also: Crone 2011, Healy 2011, Hughes and Baylin 2012, Medina 2013, Siegel 2011, 2015.

parent is supposed to take this stance always.[22] What is of interest to us is that this entails a taken-for-grantedness of certain forms of parental self-understanding.

Scholars such as Stefan Ramaekers and Judith Suissa have already pointed out many problems that arise as a consequence of the scientization of the parent-child relation. The scientific account makes parents dependent upon experts; it requires a form of professionalization and psychologization; and, most importantly, it requires parents to see their child as 'a child' and thus they are asked to 'bracket out the specific commitments and understandings they have about how they want to be as a person in their relationship with their individual child' (Ramaekers and Suissa 2012, 75). What they call the first-person perspective is replaced by a more objective, detached third-person perspective. The new brain-based parenting gives us a glimpse into the parenting paradox as parents are asked to look at their children as if they were organisms obeying the causal laws of nature.

It is instructive to look at some examples of the way this neurobiological account of the parent-child interaction indeed *paradoxically* positions parents. The language, especially in Sunderland's work, is very positive and warm while, at the same time, what parents are asked to do requires that they adopt a detached, scientific way of looking at how they interact with their child. Take, for example, Sunderland's explanation of 'touching base':

> Touching base is when little kids run around happily, then suddenly sit on Mom or Dad's lap or lean on them or touch them in someway. This can last a matter of seconds or minutes. Then off

22 Letourneau includes this significant biographical note: 'My interest in parenting followed me to graduate school, where I began to study the science underlying child development' (2013, 8).
(8). Jaak Panksepp writes in his foreword to Sunderland's *The Science of Parenting*, 'Here we have a scientifically secure base for child-rearing practices in the twenty-first century' (Sunderland 2006, 7). Both Letourneau and Sunderland take for granted that science and science alone can tell us what parenting is really about. No further justification is required.

> they go to run around happily again. This is called 'emotional refueling' and it serves to create a lovely chemical balance in their brains. If your child is doing this to you, it's a real compliment – she is experiencing you as a source of natural brain opioids (Sunderland 2006, 86).

Later in the book she counsels,

> The more warm, unconditional, constant, and physically affectionate your relationship is with your child, the stronger the release of opioids, oxytocin, and prolactin in his brain. As a result, your child is likely to feel increasingly at ease and comfortable with himself. And when he brings to mind your warm presence he will feel very safe in the world. In short, your relationship enables your child to develop psychological strength. Scientists have found that such strength is dependent on opioids being strongly activated in the brain (ibid., 108).

Bringing up children has long been considered to be an instinctive or intuitive endeavor, where the love of a mother for her child was of decisive importance. As early as the end of the nineteenth century, however, a scientifically informed upbringing was being promoted (Lee 2014, 54-55). By referring to the harder sciences, on the one hand, and using a very warm and emotional vernacular, on the other, the examples just presented take on a strange flavor. Part of this strangeness has to do with the idea that it may simply be inhuman or immoral to treat one's child as an object or an organism. This is reminiscent of Martin Heidegger's critique of physiological explanations of a relationship between two human beings, as he believes that the physiological is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for a human relationship:

> From the fact that human bodily being is interpreted as something chemical and as something which can be affected by chemical interventions it is concluded that the chemistry of the physiologi-

> cal is the ground and cause for the psychical in humans. This is a fallacious conclusion because something which is a [necessary][23] condition, that is, something without which the existential relationship cannot be actualized, is not the cause, not the efficient cause, and therefore, also, not the ground. The existential relationship does not consist of molecules, and they do not produce it. (Heidegger 2001, 155)

Heidegger believes that we simply should not confuse the physiological with the existential. However, authors such as Sunderland and Letourneau take for granted that parents as human beings are perfectly capable of looking at their relationship with their children as if it was 'produced by molecules'. They do not seem to have any doubt about this at all.

Exploring our moral horizons

But what happens if we do not just regard this possibility as paradoxical, but if we examine it seriously as a human possibility and take a closer look at it? Here we have one reason to turn to Charles Taylor's hermeneutical philosophy: the given examples are reminiscent of how Taylor in his *Sources of the Self* describes the highly valued form of modern Western rationality as it was first articulated by René Descartes and John Locke:

> Being rational now comes to mean taking some distance from ordinary, embodied human existence and striving to acquire mastery over the self and the world. The disengagement that this involves is mental or intellectual; the mind tries to prescind from its involvement in ordinary existence and aspires to a more detached, disinterested perspective on the world. (Taylor 1989, 149)

23 In this Heidegger quotation 'necessary' was added by the translator.

From this Taylorian perspective we could conceive of parents who follow Sunderland's advice not as parents who behave in an immoral manner, as a Heideggerian reading would suggest, but as parents who are striving toward a more rational and thus better way of parenting – that is, they are striving toward the ideal of scientific parenting. Taylor does not take the disengaged identity as being simply wrong and misguided. He believes we are all too deeply imbued with it and thus are not able to really repudiate it. The main issue would rather be to 'free it of its illusory pretensions to define the totality of our lives as agents, without attempting the futile and ultimately self-destructive task of rejecting it altogether' (Taylor 1985, 7).

For Sunderland, this scientific viewpoint is obligatory. Because we as authors are both fathers, taking this obligation seriously would require that we truly contemplate the following self-understandings: *Can I, as a father, conceive of my son first and foremost as a developing neurological organism? Can I see myself as a father who gives his son an oxytocin shot by hugging him, or can I understand myself as a father whose relationship with his son is first and foremost endocrinological?*

These are questions on a personal experiential level. Can we as parents really fit this disengaged approach into an understanding of ourselves as loving parents? In other words, can we see ourselves as good parents while and by objectifying our children? Could we really act upon this self-understanding? Our point is that these questions, which confront us directly with the parenting paradox, remain unasked. Sunderland, however, seems to be convinced that these experiences are first-person experiences and takes for granted that they are humanly possible.

We now see a second reason to turn to the work of Charles Taylor: his interest in the connection of human beings' self-understandings and the broad historical and moral backgrounds that provide the necessary condition to be able to understand oneself in one way or another in the first place. We can now ask a transcendental question: *What*

must be the case in the evolution of our self-understanding and moral horizons in order that we could and would characterize the parent-child relation in physicalist, detached, and instrumental ways? Who are we now that we give ourselves this paradoxical, seemingly self-defeating advice?

In the remainder of this essay, we show how we can read Taylor's work in a way that allows for the possibility of such paradoxes as 'scientific parenting'. In fact, we go further still in claiming that this late-modern period is a time of many confusions exemplified precisely by such oxymoronic formulations as 'scientific parenting'. One possible reaction to this situation is to ignore the ambiguity by saying the new scientific parenting discourse is completely wrong, along Heideggerian lines; or, on the contrary, to endorse it completely and to advocate it as, for instance, Letourneau and Sunderland do. We instead try to find a middle way. This approach will help us to show that our late-modern condition entails certain idiosyncratic dangers.

Taylor on human agency

Our aim in this section and the next is to develop a reading of Taylor's account of human agency that will help us to gain insight into the ambiguities and paradoxes of our late-modern condition. First, we will look at the noncontingent features of our being human; and, second, we will develop a strong version of the hermeneutical circle to allow for our responsibility as human beings and to make room for historicity and thus for the possibility of paradoxical self-understandings.

Taylor is a philosopher who has devoted a considerable part of his oeuvre to the question of what it means to be human, examining this issue in different guises: in these studies, he has used the terms 'self', 'identity', 'person', and 'subject' interchangeably because they all relate to the same question (Abbey 2001, 57). Of particular interest for us is how Taylor deals with certain ambiguities in our self-understanding,

ambiguities that stem from the fact that his ontological account of being a self and his contingent or historical account do not necessarily coincide.

In his 1977 paper *What Is Human Agency?* Taylor recasts the question 'What does it mean to be a human being?' as follows: 'We would like to explore in this paper what is involved in the notion of a self, of a responsible human agent. What is it that we attribute to ourselves as human agents which we would not attribute to animals?' Taylor (1985, 3) stresses two points. First, as human agents *we are self-interpreting subjects*.[24] As Ruth Abbey points out, for Taylor one of the things that makes a person what he or she is, is the understanding the person has of him or herself:

> While human beings are natural entities, we are beings with self-understanding as well, and in order to understand and explain us, consideration has to be given to these understandings. Taylor claims that humans are partly constituted by our self-understandings: how a person views or interprets herself is not all there is to know about her, but it is a vital component of identity, one that cannot be overlooked. (Abbey 2001, 58)

Second, our self-understanding incorporates our seeing ourselves as living in a space defined by (our) distinctions of worth, or strong evaluations.[25] Strong evaluation is concerned with the qualitative worth of different desires.[26] Taylor claims on different occasions that human

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24 In *Human Agency and Language*, Taylor (1985, 191) makes a stronger statement: 'That is what is contained in the slogan that human beings are self-interpreting animals: there is no such thing as what they are, independently of how they understand themselves. To use Bert Dreyfus' evocative term, they are interpretation all the way down.' See also Taylor 1989, 34.

25 Taylor 1985, 3.

26 Ibid., 16.

agency necessarily implies a background of strong evaluation.[27] In *Sources of the Self*, he further develops the intimate connection between our morality and our identity or self-understanding by using the image of orientation in physical space.[28] As human beings, we consider our identity as an orientation toward the good. According to Taylor, our being self-interpretive subjects against a background of strong evaluations forms a first distinct ontological or ahistorical feature of human agency.

Let us now turn to Taylor's second account of human agency. Against the rationalist *disengaged* view of human agency that he takes to have become dominant in our modern times, Taylor argues that human agency is *engaged* agency in the distinctive and technical sense that 'the world of the agent is shaped by his or her form of life, or history, or bodily existence (Taylor 2006, 203)'. To have one's 'world shaped' by something is a relation different from the causal link it is often confused with, in Taylor's view. In the latter sense, for instance, what one can see now is a consequence of the way his body is positioned in space. For instance, one cannot see the door behind him because the refracted light cannot reach his retina. This is not an example of engaged agency. In this case the relationship between our experience and our embodiment is an external one, where we, as if we were a neutral observer, can assert a contingent causal relationship between our position in space and the rays of light that cannot reach our eye.

The world-shaping relationship comes down to an *internal* relationship that concerns the intelligibility of certain terms. We can only understand the words *up* and *down*, *nearby* and *far away*, from within

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27 See, for example, Taylor 1989, 27; and Taylor 1985, 3. A brief explanation of strong evaluation may be helpful here: When I engage in strong evaluation, I prefer one desire over another because I deem it of higher value. So I abstain from lying because I value honesty more than having the small profit I would have if I were to lie now.

28 'By analogy, our orientation in relation to the good requires not only some framework(s) which defines the shape of the qualitatively higher but also a sense of where we stand in relation to this' (Taylor 1989, 42).

our bodily experience.[29] This relationship is internal: it requires an involvement, a Heideggerian being-in-the-world; it requires the experiencing itself, from the inside as it were. Taylor explicitly does not restrict engaged agency to embodiment. Our human world is being shaped by body, culture, and form of life. Wittgenstein (1958, I, §584) gives an example of a context other than embodiment:

> Now suppose I sit in my room and hope that N.N. will come and bring me some money, and suppose one minute of this state could be isolated, cut out of its context [*Zusammenhang*]; would what happened in it then not be hope? – Think, for example, of the words which you perhaps utter in this space of time. They are no longer part of this language. And in different surroundings the institution of money doesn't exist either.

Here, too, we can take the relationship between our experience and our world in the two senses identified by Taylor. First, we can see how a subject lives in a world where money exists. We can see an interaction between a person and her money. We can see how money 'makes her happy'. Then money becomes one of the many factors that have a causal influence on this person's self-understanding and, for example, her well-being. Second, in the stronger sense of world-shaping, we know that to be able to interpret a piece of metal as a coin – that is, as money – there has to be a sense-making context or form of life. This is always intertwined with personal backgrounds, and that is the reason we need the person's self-interpretation and thus cannot know before

29 In the following quote, Taylor uses the *example* of embodiment to explain the difference between two interpretations of the idea that our experience is shaped by our body, culture, or form of life: 'Thus there are two quite different kinds of relationship which might be expressed by saying that our experience is shaped by our bodily constitution. In the first – the case of the wall behind me – we note some consequences of this constitution for our experience, however characterized. In the second, we point out how the nature of this experience is formed by this constitution, and how the terms in which this experience is described are given their sense only in relation to this form of embodiment. The first kind of relation is asserted in an ordinary statement of contingent causality. The second concerns by contrast the conditions of intelligibility of certain terms. It is this second relation I want to invoke in speaking of our "world being shaped" by body, culture, form of life. The ways in which our world is so shaped define the contours of what I am calling engaged agency – what Heidegger sometimes referred to as the 'finitude' of the knowing agent' (Taylor 1995b, 63).

asking or *a priori* what money means to her now. So for Taylor as a hermeneutical philosopher in a Heideggerian/Wittgensteinian tradition, the idea of an undetachable, (un)articulated background is utterly important. These mostly tacit backgrounds provide the necessary conditions for sense making. If they remained in the foreground constantly, they would literally be in our way. For this reason, we mostly forget that it is only because of our being embodied creatures that we can distinguish between objects that are nearby and things that are farther away. We forget that *up* and *down* are only intelligible as concepts because of the fact we have human bodies. In the same vein, Wittgenstein shows us that we forget that money counts as money only because of our shared form of life. But the fact that this background is not visible to us most of the time does not mean it is not there.

As already noted, Taylor believes there is a strong modernist tendency to adhere to a rationalist view of agency (the thinking agent) in which the relation of 'world-shaping' that holds between a kind of agency and a certain form of experience is easily confused with a psychophysical causal relation (Taylor 2006). This, we believe, is the phenomenon evident in the previously given examples of parent-child interactions, where what happens is accounted for in terms of physiological causal relations. Seen from a Taylorian perspective, this outlook, attractive as it may seem, actually detaches the person from his or her sense-giving contexts and replaces these internal relationships with external ones. For example, if a mother loves her child, she has a more or less articulated sense of what this means; she will have a certain form of knowing how to show this, how to act out of loving her child; loving her child gets its meaning from her personal history, her cultural background, her ideas of a desired future, and so on. The proponent of science-informed good parenting implicitly but urgently asks the mother to abstract from or to put between brackets these sense-making or world-shaping contexts, and to conceive of herself as a psychophysical causal factor and of the child as an organism following in its functioning causal mechanistic rules.

A hermeneutical circle

The idea of human agency as self-interpretation against a background of strong evaluations and the idea of engaged agency function in two different strands of Taylor's philosophy, respectively: the former is central to his effort to articulate noncontingent features of being human, what Taylor himself somewhat hesitantly called a philosophical anthropology (Taylor 1985, 1), and the latter is tied to his criticism of the primacy of epistemology in our Western (philosophical) tradition. Taylor never mentions strong evaluations in his account of engaged agency (1995b and 2006). In our reading of Taylor, we will explicitly bring these two accounts together. More importantly, we will show how these two accounts, namely self-interpretation and world-shaping, though treated separately both in Taylor and in Abbey's reading of Taylor, can be seen as internally connected in a hermeneutical circle. This means both are of equal importance. Recognizing this relationship enables us to appreciate how new individual or collective self-interpretations can feed back into our self-understanding as they become a part of the world-shaping context. Moreover, it can help us to understand and appreciate the ambiguities and paradoxes that seem so typical of our late-modern condition and to try to reach a higher level of self-understanding through analyzing Sunderland's and Letourneau's work on parenting, rather than merely criticizing it.

First, in order to do this, it is important to stress that Taylor's idea of engaged agency encompasses more than mere embodiment. In her monograph on Taylor, Abbey treats the idea of engaged agency in the context of Taylor's criticism of modern Western epistemology, in which a detached subject has to try to regain connection or contact with the outside world of objects (Abbey 2001, 179 ff). To make this point, she accounts for Taylor's idea of engaged agency as a form of embodiment in line with Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This is, of course, a very strong argument against the Cartesian epistemological tradition. Still, by not referring to the idea of world-shaping, and by elaborating engaged agency only as embodied agency, Abbey leaves the impression (probably

unintentionally) that for Taylor engaged agency is nothing more and nothing less than embodied agency. While Taylor himself only mentions and elaborates embodied agency, he reminds us, as noted earlier, of the fact that sense-giving contexts are multiple (Taylor 1995b and 2006).

Second, for Taylor the idea of a background plays an important role in both his accounts of human agency. In his first account, this background is made up of one's strong evaluations; in his second, it is conceived as 'embodiment', 'form of life', and 'our history'. We believe the strong evaluations of his first account can be subsumed under the broader categories of embodiment, form of life, and our history in his second account. The diversified background of embodiment, culture, language, history, and strong evaluations, then, allows for the (partly) constitutive self-understanding. This interpretation leaves the impression that world-shaping is primordial since it enables self-interpretation and makes it possible for us to understand ourselves, that is, to understand our backgrounds (Abbey 2001, 81). For we could say that it is not our objectivity, but our subjectivity, conceived not as an empty point (for example, Locke's punctual self)[30] but as being-in-the-world in the Heideggerian sense, that serves as the necessary background to understand how we can be human beings.

At this point, we want to propose taking a third step. In accordance with Taylor's anthropology, this subjectivity is constituted partly by the fact that we are self-interpreting and speaking animals. As human beings we continuously (re)interpret the world and ourselves. We are constantly articulating or bringing to the foreground parts of our sense-giving backgrounds. Our linguistic articulations of the unarticulated background feed back into this background. This happens on the individual as well as the collective level. To take one example, the way Freudian and Marxist concepts have become colloquial has changed the way we understand ourselves–without it being necessary, by the way, to have a 'correct' understanding of these concepts

30 (Taylor 1989, 159 ff.)

(Abbey 2001, 154-155). In the same manner, one's re-evaluation of one's strong evaluations changes one's background and thus one's self-interpretation. So although we might believe the world-shaping relationship to be primordial to our being human, in fact we always enter a hermeneutical circle in which interpretation implies a background that can be articulated and that changes our self-interpretations.[31]

In our reading of Taylor's philosophy, then, the term 'engaged agency' is the more generic, encompassing concept though it is not a primordial one. It implies (partly) constitutive self-understanding against a diversified background of embodiment, culture, history, language, and strong evaluations, and it allows our self-understandings to feed back into the meaning-giving or world-shaping background. Instead of accepting a hierarchy in which engaged agency – or, specifically, embodiment – is more basic than self-interpretation, it is more instructive to use the image of the hermeneutical circle.

Two things follow from this. First, for Taylor as for Heidegger, the hermeneutical circle has to be taken in a strong sense: interpretation leads to interpretation and this happens endlessly, as the final interpretation is never reached (Hoy 2006). But for Taylor this has to be conceived as a nonneutral fact, by connecting it to selfhood and thus to morality and responsibility, and as intertwined with personal progress. So how does Taylor account for the fact that human agency is about a self as a *responsible* human being? For Taylor the identity of the self is defined in terms of more basic or essential evaluations, which

31 In *Human Agency and Language*, Taylor writes, 'our formulations about ourselves can alter what they are about' (1985, 101). As Abbey (2001, 59) observes, this claim suggests that for Taylor a change in my self-interpretation is at the same time a change in me: it is a change in the self that is both the interpreter and the interpreted. As a person acquires different vocabularies for talking about his or her experiences, emotions, or aspirations, the person's understanding of those things and of him- or herself changes.

provide the horizon for other evaluations one makes. The more fundamental evaluations are often least clear and least articulated, and these are the ones that are also the hardest to be clear about. Taylor does not believe we humans are able to radically choose our evaluations, as Jean-Paul Sartre did, nor does he believe we cannot help having them. His argument is that fresh insight can always change our evaluations, and thus ourselves, for the better. Hence, he describes his understanding of responsibility as follows: 'within the limits of my capacity to change myself by fresh insight … I am responsible[32] in the full direct, 'modern' sense for my evaluations (Taylor 1985, 39).' Fresh insight can change our self-evaluations in a passive way, but more actively it is always possible to pose the question:

> [O]ught I to re-evaluate my most basic evaluations? Have I really understood what I sense to be the highest mode of life? Now this kind of re-evaluation will be radical … in the sense that our looking again can be so undertaken that in principle *no formulations are considered unrevisable*. (ibid., 39, emphasis added)

In this sense Taylor's ontological claim that human beings are self-interpreting subjects who try to make sense of their lives and of their selves opens up to a form of responsibility and thus to a broader possibility of changing one's self – that is, changing one's orientation

32 Interestingly, the psychologist Jerome Kagan also connects interpretation with revision and so with responsibility. He distinguishes between three ways clinicians categorize their patients: as having a disease, as having learned maladaptive behaviours, or as having certain private interpretations. This has consequences for their conception of treatment. Respectively, they will want to cure the patient, teach the patient new behaviours, or persuade the patient to rethink his or her understanding of the distress and its causes. In the latter case, the patient takes an active role in this process of rethinking, and hence assumes much of the responsibility for remission. Kagan notes, 'Least common are clinicians who categorize the patient's plight as originating in private interpretations of life experiences. The noun *interpretation* is preferentially linked to the predicate *revise*, and these therapists persuade their patients to rethink their understanding of their distress and its causes. The verb *revise* in the sentence "The doctor revises the thinking of the patient" implies that the patient must assume an active role in rethinking his or her premises. Therefore, much of the responsibility for remission rests with the patient'. (2012, 206–207)

toward the good. Abbey points out that, for Taylor, revising one's self-interpretation is perceived as progress.[33]

The limits of disembedding

The second thing that follows from our entering this hermeneutical circle entails the possibility that our contingent self-understandings can conflict with our ontological features – that is, it entails the possibility of paradox. Taylor shows this in two examples: the idea of disengagement as a contingent example of engaged agency, and that of individualism as a contingent example of our dependency on a social matrix.

The first example we find in *Sources of the Self*. Taylor claims the disengaged identity has in fact become a familiar modern figure. It gains control through disengagement, and, importantly, this disengagement is always correlative of an 'objectification'. In Taylor's (1989, 160) account, the term objectification has a precise meaning: 'Objectifying a given domain involves depriving it of its normative force for us. If we take a domain of being in which hitherto the way things are has set norms or standards for us, and take a new stance to it as neutral, I will speak of objectifying it'.

For Taylor, living within strongly qualified moral horizons is constitutive of human agency, and this is not a historical and contingent fact. There are no exceptions; there cannot be 'supermen of disengaged objectification'. Taylor uses rather dramatic and very negative qualifiers in describing a person who would really step out of these moral

33 Abbey (2001, 61) explains, 'When an individual adopts a new interpretation of some experience, event, or emotion, this person sees him- or herself as selecting not simply a different interpretation, but a better, truer, or more perspicacious one. So the individual's self-interpretations are not simply arbitrary impositions or constructions of meaning; there is no sense that any reading of myself will do. Just as Taylor argues that the individual's moral life is typically construed in narrative terms, so he proposes that the succession of self-understandings that individuals adopt is seen by them to be part of a progressive story about the unfolding or enhancing self-knowledge'.

horizons (objectifying them). According to him, such a person would be 'in the grip of an appalling identity crisis', 'deeply disturbed', and outside 'our space of interlocution' – in short, such a person would be 'pathological' (ibid., 27).

But, in making his point so strongly – that is, by claiming that a human standpoint or position outside any background of moral evaluations is uninhabitable, is unliveable for human agents *qua* human agents – Taylor then has to address the problem presented by the fact that there are actually people who embrace the ideal of a disengaged agent who stands outside any framework. Taylor believes such people are misguided because they in fact are committed to certain moral frameworks, but they fail to see this. A famous example is the utilitarian ideologue who 'admires people who live up to this ideal, condemns those who fail or who are too confused even to accept it, [and] feels wrong when he himself falls below it' (ibid., 31). In other words, this figure of disengagement is self-defeating. It cannot count as a counter-example against the idea of engaged agency. Taylor sketches more examples of figures of disengagement in the weak sense of the word, including 'the believer in disengaged objectification, who sees mastery of reason as a kind of rational control over the emotions attained through the distance of scientific scrutiny, the kind of modern of whom Freud is a prototypical example and for whom he is often a model' (ibid., 45). So Taylor's philosophy leaves room for the ambiguity and paradox we find in the Sunderland and Letourneau examples.

It has been argued that, as a parent, one could not become a figure of disengagement in the strong sense because the parent-child relationship is moral all the way down;[34] however, even if parents adopt a so-called disengaged stance, this would not entail them stepping outside a background of moral evaluations. In fact, they are not asked to do so. Books such as *The Science of Parenting* and *Scientific Parenting* suggest that parents who adopt a scientific stance will be better parents,

34 Ramaekers and Suissa 2012, 61, 89, and 108, for instance.

that their children will be better citizens, and so on. Parents are thus implicitly offered a moral framework. Our point here is analogous to the example of the utilitarian ideologue: the proponent of scientific parenting is not abstracting from morality altogether; rather, he or she is actively trying to persuade parents to embrace certain 'moral ideals', to use Taylor's terminology.[35]

Let us take a look at our second example. Abbey points out how the ideal of the free, disengaged self that Taylor traces to the Scientific Revolution is also free of *social embedding* (Abbey 2001, 100). Taylor elaborates the idea of a historical process of disembedding individuals in his historical account of (multiple) modernities, *Modern Social Imaginaries*. In this work he deals with another example of misguidedness – or what we prefer to call ambiguity or paradox – in our culture. Taylor points out that we moderns are likely to misconceive ourselves as atomistic individuals that have no dependency on the social matrix to which we belong. We confuse the formal with the material mode of social embedding:

> [O]ur first self-understanding was deeply embedded in society. Our essential identity was as father, son, and so on, and as a member of this tribe. Only later did we come to conceive of ourselves as free individuals first (…). [W]e have to distinguish between a formal and material mode of social embedding (…). On the first level, we are always socially embedded; we learn our identities in dialogue, by being inducted into a certain language. But on the level of content, what we may learn is to be an individual, have our own opinions (…). (Taylor 2004, 64-65)

Although formally socially embedded, we materially learned to be atomistic individuals, and we tend to ontologize this contingent and

35 In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor writes, 'What do I mean by a moral ideal? I mean a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where "better" and "higher" are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire.' (1992, 16)

historical fact. Taylor uses a thought experiment to escape this 'bewitchment': he considers the question, 'What would I be like if I had been born to different parents?' Of course, one can answer, 'like the people who were in fact born to those other parents'. But if you really try to get a grip on the question, he writes, then your 'head begins to swim.' Taylor believes that making sense of this question requires delving too deep into the formative horizon of one's identity. Still, many questions that were not conceivable in earlier societies are not only conceivable nowadays, but they arise as burning practical questions: Should I have married that woman/man? Should we have had children? Should I convert to another religion? For Taylor, this is a measure of our disembedding. Because of this evolution, we can entertain an abstract question such as 'What would I be like if I was born to different parents?,' even if we cannot make it imaginatively real (ibid. 54-55).Taylor views this ability to abstract and disconnect from one's social matrix as a distinctly modern Western phenomenon.[36] But he also believes it is ontologically limited.

Embracing our late-modern condition

Our late-modern condition is characterized by ambiguities and paradoxes that we cannot escape because new ideals have been deeply inscribed in our forms of life;[37] they have become part of our sense-giving moral horizons and hence our self-understandings. The idea(l)s of disengaged agency, neutral agency, and scientific agency have entered our form of life, and this entails the conviction that unless a scientific approach is followed, our world will no longer be habitable. So for us late-modern Western subjects, the idea of parenting without any recourse to science is not acceptable. Taylor proposed that we should try to limit the scope of the ideal of disengagement. The scientific parenting case

36 Compare this with the distinction between the ontological and the advocacy aspects of communitarianism in Taylor's political thought. See Abbey 2001, 102; and Taylor 1995a, 181–203.

37 Another example of such a paradox in our late-modern society is that we demand that persons must be unique individuals in order to be accepted socially.

shows that this is not an easy task to accomplish. In this section, we will first try to understand why it may be difficult to escape the pitfalls of our time, and then we will assess the new scientific parenting account and see what the pitfalls are in that case.

We saw how our late-modern ambiguity and paradox has become possible as a historical condition because we continuously engage in a hermeneutical circle of (self-)understanding. Our moral horizons are complex and partly contradictory: we are socialized as atomistic individuals; we conceive of engaged agency as if it was disengaged agency by replacing sense-giving with psychophysical causation; and parenting experts like Sunderland and Letourneau position themselves morally by referring to allegedly value-free hard sciences. In a sense, our noncontingent human features recede ever further into our late-modern backgrounds. They become harder to retrieve as they escape articulation. Sunderland and Letourneau are cases in point: they do not even seem to notice that there could be a problem of disengaged agency. They would probably claim that their viewpoint is very 'engaged', as indeed they are asking parents to be highly engaged. This shows how our late-modern condition makes us increasingly blind to the fact that we are self-interpreting beings, that we position ourselves toward the good by being strong evaluators, that we are engaged agents with a multifaceted subjectivity, that we need a linguistic community in order to be able to articulate anything, and that, as self-interpreting subjects, we are capable of taking responsibility for ourselves by revising our evaluations and interpretations. Furthermore, as Taylor's thought experiment shows, it is difficult to see where the limits are. We are not sure how far we can go. It is symptomatic of our late-modern condition that we cannot easily distinguish what 'goes' from what doesn't, so we risk going further than we can bear. For instance, parents might really try to hold onto the ideal of taking a disengaged stance toward their children and their parenting in a manner analogous to people who try to be independent of others and who try to live up to the ideals of atomistic individualism. But these parents probably will not succeed. Unlike scientists, they did not receive training in how to assume a disengaged stance; their children are not objects under

study, but are *their* children.[38] Their bond with their children is not reducible to interacting nervous systems or hormonal systems, and it has a significance that cannot be captured completely by objectifying it.

While our noncontingent features disappear into the background, the new ideals are explicitly promoted. That explains why it can be hard for late-modern Western subjects like ourselves to see any problem with Sunderland's and Letourneau's accounts of parenting. It also means that it can be very hard for policymakers, parenting experts who engage in various forms of parenting support, and parents themselves to see potential problems with these science-based approaches. In the same vein, it can be hard nowadays to see that in order to thrive as individual subjects, we still need others.

So what would these problems be? When we look from a hermeneutical perspective at the parenting paradox as exemplified in the work of Sunderland and Letourneau, we see that the *new* scientific account of parenting does not take any aspect of Taylor's (revised) anthropology into account. The widely accepted ideal of scientific objectivity that is espoused by both Sunderland and Letourneau involves a strong tendency not to accept the idea of a hermeneutical circle. The advocates of science-informed parenting claim that they want to break through the fuzziness of unreliable parenting opinions.[39] Their conviction is

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38 Ramaekers and Suissa (2012) repeatedly make this point.

39 See, for example, Strahan, Dixon Jr., and Banks 2010: 'Sometimes it feels as though everybody has an opinion on how you should bring up your child – and no two people seem to agree on how it should be done for the best! *Parenting with Reason* cuts through the masses of confusing and often contradictory advice about parenting by providing hard evidence to back up the tough decisions all parents face. Unlike many self-help guides to parenting which are based on the opinion of one author, this book is based on many findings from scientific research, giving you a trustworthy, 'evidence-based' guide to help you see your way through parenting dilemma's' (2010, i).
In *The Science of Parenting*, Sunderland gives another good example: 'There was a moment of shock when I first realized how much impact the everyday interactions between parent and child can have on a child's developing brain. Yet the mass of scientific research on this subject was not getting through to parents or to the public arena. This is what fueled *my passion to write a book that would not be just one more opinion on parenting (we have quite enough of these)*, but would rather empower parents to make informed choices for their children based on what we can learn from these scientific studies' (2006, 6, emphasis added).

that we finally have the means necessary to attain the hard and unchanging knowledge about what really goes on between parents and their children. More interpretive sciences such as psychology have been left behind,[40] and this is seen as a relief and an improvement since neuroscience promises direct epistemic access to reality.

There is no role for the sense-giving backgrounds to play in a hermeneutical sense, as a form of 'engaged agency'; the only 'background' at work is embodiment – we are our brains, as a Dutch neurologist claims without any hint of irony (Swaab 2014). This means that our interactions are reduced to exchanges of bodily processes. Our multifaceted subjectivity is replaced by a purely biological objectivity; hence understanding is replaced by explanation. Take, for example, Letourneau's use of the word 'influence' in her book title: *Scientific Parenting: What Science Reveals about Parental Influence*. Here, the term is not used in a hermeneutical sense, to mean that what parents or children do is always *interpreted* by all participants; rather, in this context, it has a purely causal and thus explanatory meaning that, as we have seen, is not accessible to those participating in the interactions themselves. This reinforces the prevailing ideas of parental determinism and of parents' needing the help of experts to bring up their children successfully. Since the implicit idea is that we share the same physiology, all kinds of relevant nonbiological differences – such as cultural differences, biographical differences, differences in socioeconomic background, and so on – are bracketed out. This means that one approach serves all. Governments can reduce social politics to interventions in the parent-child realm with an exclusive focus on brain development.

But, as already noted, morality is not ruled out completely. On the contrary, one is supposed to become a warm and caring parent through

40 See, for example, an interview with Peter Adriaenssens, a Belgian child psychiatrist and parenting expert (Beel 2006).

adherence to the hard-science account of parenting.[41] Experts in the field of parenting and parenting support are expected to keep the latest scientific developments in mind. According to this view, it seems a bit immoral to continue to refer to developmental psychology when we now have all this brain knowledge. Still, we believe there is a major problem on the level of morality. A hermeneutical approach such as Taylor's can help remind us that what we take to be our 'reality' always entails our personal sense-giving backgrounds, which we cannot choose and cannot oversee.

Because we are (self-)interpreting subjects, our articulations are always at least partly our own responsibility. To put this in the words of Stanley Cavell (1999, 216), the scientific account of parenting asks parents and parenting experts to accept that the world, which is supposed to be accurately described by scientists, provides answers that are independent of any individual's responsibility for claiming something to be so – whether that individual is a scientist, parenting expert, or parent. The Taylorian version of personal responsibility is also ruled out since parents are not invited to reassess their deepest convictions, but instead are instructed to listen to the experts who can generate claims directly from reality. Even parenting experts are no longer free to refer to their own personal values or their own personal responsibility. Moreover, although the examples of scientific parenting we looked at still entail a positioning toward the good, in silent accordance with Taylor's anthropology, it is not up to parents themselves to decide what this good means, and this positioning is never made explicit. As a result, parents are not understood to be full-blown, adult moral agents, and experts are blind to the fact that

41 In *The Science of Parenting*, Sunderland writes, 'Opioids are hormones that give us a sense of well-being; these chemicals are produced when a child is lovingly touched or held by a parent or other caring person. Warm, attentive parents will repeatedly activate the release of these hormones, creating a secure bond with their child. If, however, parents do not understand their child's need for closeness – or worse, if they regularly respond to that child with criticism and shouting – the release of opioids and oxytocin is blocked. Instead, the child may then suffer from "hormonal hell" due to prolonged stress, which, as we will see later in the book, can cause permanent changes in the child's brain' (2006, 26).

they often repeat commonsense ideas that reflect our contemporary moral standards in the form of scientific knowledge.[42] Parents are thus denied their responsibility, as articulated by Taylor, for personal moral reflection; experts, on the other hand, either keep silent about or are perhaps unaware of the role they actually play in imposing or reinforcing moral standards. From this science-based viewpoint, there is no sense in looking at parents' strong evaluations and revising them. Responsibility boils down to accepting the science-informed approach to parenting without question. Of course, one might object, for many parents these accounts offer fresh insights, which means parents can and probably will passively change their evaluations. But parents are not invited to revise their own evaluations in the radical sense of considering that no evaluation is beyond revision; they are simply not addressed as people who have their own strong evaluations. Therefore, responsibility, in the distinctive sense that Taylor uses this term, is not an issue at all. Taylor has suggested that we should try to accept the disengaged identity without letting it take over all of our life. The case of scientific parenting shows that this is indeed a necessary goal, but one that is not easy to accomplish. We are lured into overenthusiastic acceptance of only one moral ideal (or, to use Taylor's term, 'hypergood') while forgetting the others. Indeed, in our reading of the hermeneutical circle, our noncontingent features – for example, the 'fact' that we are strong evaluators – are also moral ideals. In articulating them, Taylor clearly wants us to see that they are important. However, we late moderns are attracted to simplified understandings of our very complex and multi-layered moral horizons. For politicians, parenting experts, and parents alike, it can be very tempting to reduce the complexity to a level that is more manageable, with the risk of dehumanizing ourselves.

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42 In *Parenting Culture Studies*, Macvarish (2014, 176) makes this point: 'While the use of a neuroscientific vocabulary of synapses, neurons, and cortisol appears to bring scientific advancements to bear on parenting, the recommendations derived from it tend to chime with existing common-sense ideas about what constitutes good parenting, indicating that shifting cultural norms shape the kinds of scientific "truths" on which claims about correct parenting are made'.

Embracing our late-modern condition means we have to find a middle ground between acceptance and rejection. We need to take a critical 'yes, but there is more to it' attitude. Adopting such an attitude in this specific case would mean that experts should rely on science, but should also realize and admit that they are holding a moral position and that they are imposing a certain self-understanding and particular hypergoods upon parents. In addition, it would mean conceiving of the truths of science as provisional in principle and as limited in scope and application, since promoting certain scientific findings over others always also involves some kind of human interpretation that is contingent upon a *zeitgeist*, and thus involves responsibility. Given this, scientific results should not be presented to parents as universal and non-contingent self-evident truths, but parents should be granted the opportunity to consider and reconsider the moral viewpoints they imply. This means that parents as human beings deserve a space in which to evaluate what it would mean for themselves to endorse or reject these views. By extension, it would mean that they have some responsibility of their own to look for ways to make our world a better place. The question we could ask ourselves as parents, then, would not be 'Is it really possible for us as fathers to experience this paradoxical parenting self-understanding or to act according to this self-conception?', but, rather, '(Why) should we *prefer* this self-understanding?', or 'Is this a possibility that we should deem of higher value'? We believe that our late-modern condition makes it harder for parents to ask precisely these *personal ethical* questions.

If we really want to deal with the challenges of our late-modern time, we cannot be satisfied with simply rejecting what many of our contemporary human beings appear to consider received wisdom. On the other hand, enthusiastically and uncritically endorsing, for instance, scientific approaches to parenting is a negation of the very complexity of the contradicting ideals so typical of our late-modern condition. This negation entails its own dangers.

CHAPTER 3

How scientific frameworks ‘frame parents’: Wittgenstein on the import of changing language-games

How scientific frameworks 'frame parents': Wittgenstein on the import of changing language-games[43]

Introduction

In this chapter I take the way certain propositions function in a particular parenting handbook as a starting point of an investigation into the ways language-games actually change and what this implies for parents and parenting. The choice of *The Whole-brain Child. 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind* (Siegel and Bryson 2012)[44] is not coincidental. It represents an important strand in parenting support – a default position –, that holds first that there is a lack of parental confidence which can be restored by providing scientific knowledge, and second that the providing of this knowledge is somehow morally neutral: these resources allegedly only provide information. The sciences drawn from until recently were developmental and behavioral psychology, but the latest evolution is that parenting expertise draws from findings in the fields of 'hard' sciences such as neurology, epigenetics and endocrinology. Engaging with Wittgenstein and Wittgenstein scholarship, especially on *On Certainty*, I will critically question both of the above assumptions.

43 This chapter has been published in *A Companion to Wittgenstein on Education: Pedagogical Investigations* (Springer, 2017) edited by Jeff Stickney and Michael A. Peters. This version is slightly longer because I included more Wittgenstein quotations, especially from *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*.

44 I will further refer to this book as WBC.

WBC is a bestseller and has been translated into 21 languages, at the time of writing.[45] In the introductory pages of WBC parents read that they will acquire knowledge that will allow them to 'parent' better and it is suggested that what they will learn is firmly grounded in epistemic certainties, which are in a way foundational:

> So we want to introduce you to the whole-brain perspective. We'd like to explain some fundamental concepts about the brain and help you apply your new knowledge in ways that will make parenting easier and more meaningful. (WBC, 3)

> What you do as a parent matters, and we'll provide you with straightforward, *scientifically based ideas* that will help you build a strong relationship with your child that can help shape his brain well and give him the best foundation for a healthy and happy life. (WBC, 4; *emphasis mine*)

Parents learn that through their relationship with their child, they can help *shape his/her brain*, and that a brain that is well shaped, is *a foundation for a happy, healthy and prosperous life*. Some basic ideas that I believe to be very significant are:

> 'Parents can shape their child's brain, through their relationship with him/her.'

> 'Brains can be well shaped.'

> 'Well shaped brains are a foundation for a happy, healthy and prosperous life.'

WBC contains what I believe is another rather central and fundamental idea, that we could rephrase as: *'parenting ultimately boils down to*

45 See Siegel's website: http://www.drdansiegel.com/books/the_whole_brain_child/ accessed on 16 November 2015.

integration, this is the wiring and rewiring of our child's brain'.[46] This proposition is not articulated, let alone claimed, as such. But it seems to be central in the book, as the next small selection of parts of the book (hopefully) will make clear.

> The first chapter presents the concept of *parenting with the brain in mind* and introduces the simple and powerful concept at the heart of the whole-brain approach, integration. (WBC, x)

> A clear understanding of these different aspects of the whole-brain approach will allow you *to view parenting in a whole new way*. (WBC, xi)

> [T]he brain physically changes throughout the course of our lives, not just in childhood, as we had previously assumed. What molds our brain? Experience. (…) [O]n top of our basic brain architecture and our inborn temperament, parents have much they can do to provide the kinds of experiences that will help develop a resilient well-integrated brain. This book will show how to use your everyday experiences to help your child's brain become more and more integrated. (…) This wire-and-rewire process is what integration is all about: giving your children experiences to create connections between different parts of the brain. (WBC, 7-8)

> The rate of brain maturation is largely influenced by the genes we inherit. But the degree of integration may be exactly what we can influence in our day-to-day parenting. *The good news is that by using everyday moments, you can influence how well your child's brain grows toward integration.* (WBC, 10; *emphasis in original*) [47]

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46 Compare this with Wittgenstein (1966, 24): 'The attraction of certain kinds of explanation is overwhelming. At a given time, the attraction of a certain kind of explanation is greater than you can conceive. In particular, explanations of the kind "This is really only this".'

47 It may seem that I am overstating their claim here: is 'integration' really intended to replace the broader scope of the parenting role? The least one can say is that it is *the* central and very pervasive idea within their account of parenting. And we can imagine many readers would interpret it in this way.

Some ideas are emphatically presented as very central and foundational.

> Sibling rivalry is like so many other issues that make parenting difficult – tantrums, disobedience, homework battles, discipline matters, and so on. As we'll explain in the coming chapters, *these everyday parenting challenges result from a lack of integration within your child's brain*. (WBC 9-10; *emphasis mine*)

Others are mentioned '*en passant*' and thus demand some interpretative effort.

> 'The upstairs brain weighs different options.'
>
> 'A parent connects with his/her child's brain.'[48]
>
> 'Brains are shaped by parents.'

The most basic or fundamental ideas of the book (for instance, 'Humans have brains') are not explicitly mentioned, and it would furthermore be strange to mention them, although they are very fundamental.

> 'What happens between a child and a parent are interactions.'
>
> 'We have brains.'
>
> '*Parenting* exists.'

48 'Once she had connected with him right brain to right brain, it was much easier to connect left to left and deal with the issues in a rational manner. By first *connecting* with his right brain, she could then *redirect* with the left brain through logical explanation and planning, which required that his left hemisphere join the conversation. This approach allowed him to use both sides of his brain in an integrated, coordinated way.' (WBC, 25)

These propositions are exemplary for many parenting manuals and websites. They allegedly inform[49] parents of epistemic certainties, that result from scientific enquiries. What they have in common is that they seem to say: Consider these propositions as beyond any doubt. Still, some of them are rather new and maybe even unsettling, for instance to believe that it is not the child, but his/her brain that weighs different options.

Non-epistemic foundations in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein showed a particular interest in propositions[50] that were beyond doubt, but he was not the first to *articulate them*. In his famous attempt to overcome scepticism the common sense philosopher G. E. Moore claimed that he *knew* that e.g. 'Here is one hand and here is another,' or that 'The earth existed for a long time before my birth.' Moore believed that the propositions that he had discovered were universal and established knowledge. They were truly foundational in an epistemological sense to him and allegedly countered the threats of idealism and scepticism (cf. Hamilton 2014,168-177). Wittgenstein did not accept that these statements expressed knowledge, but was on the other hand convinced that they articulated certainties, leaving open the possibility of non-epistemic foundations. For Wittgenstein, Moore's *epistemic* certainties are no more and no less than the unmoving foundations of our

49 'But even the most caring, best-educated parents often lack basic information about their child's brain.' (WBC, 3); 'This is really important *information* for parents to understand.' (WBC, 41)

50 I will, in the following discussion, use the word 'proposition' as is commonly done in the Wittgenstein scholarship. When I use 'proposition' I follow Hamilton (2014, 112) who believes that Wittgenstein, at least in his later philosophy, conceived of 'propositions' non-technically as 'statements' or 'what is said' in an everyday sense. However, I do not agree with Hamilton when he claims that 'a proposition, unlike a sentence, does not belong to a particular language, but must always be expressible in one' (ibid.), because it seems to allow for meaning outside of a context of use.

language-games *in disguise*, which means they cannot truly be established as knowledge:

> To say of man, in Moore's sense, that he *knows* something, that what he says is therefore unconditionally the truth, seems wrong to me. – It is the truth only inasmuch as it is an unmoving foundation of his language-games. (1969, §403)

This 'unmoving foundation' is no more and no less than 'logic' in Wittgenstein's view. For instance, Rhees takes 'the questions raised in *On Certainty*' to be 'questions in logic, not questions in epistemology' (Philips in Rhees 2003, 135) and thus (Rhees 2003, 48-51) claims that for Wittgenstein the whole set of remarks that compose *On Certainty* is a discussion of logic, not in the sense that it describes logical principles, but in the sense that it describes language-games, or what belongs to a language-game. For language and communication to be possible, there is a logical requirement of agreement in judgments.[51]

> For Wittgenstein, agreement in the judgment 'This is a hand' – speakers agree that this is a hand – underlies the determination of the meaning of 'hand' in English. It follows that if, in normal circumstances, someone were to express doubt that this is a hand, then either their understanding of English, or their cognitive or sensory functioning, would be in question. (…) The proposition that in normal circumstances no two-handed person doubts whether they have two hands is, for Wittgenstein, part of logic – and not, as most philosophers would say, an empirical claim. It is part of the characterization of a language-game – the language-game of knowledge-ascription which relies on agreement in such judgments. (Hamilton 2014, 32-33)

51 Cf. Wittgenstein 1958, §242: 'If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments.'

On many occasions in his later philosophy Wittgenstein refers to situations of learning, to emphasize that we are not born with this agreement in judgments. Instead we have to become, to borrow a phrase of Cavell, initiated into language, and hence into logic. Cavell claims that for Wittgenstein language-learning implies being initiated into *forms of life*:

> Instead, then, of saying either that we *tell* beginners what words mean, or that we *teach* them what objects are, I will say: We initiate them, into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world. (…) In 'learning language' you learn not merely what the names of things are, but what a name is; not merely what the form of expression is for expressing a wish, but what expressing a wish is; not merely what the word for 'father' is, but what a father is; not merely what the word for 'love' is, but what love is. In learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the forms of life which make those sounds the words they are, do what they do – e.g. name, call, point, express a wish or affection, indicate a choice or an aversion. (Cavell 1999, 177-178)

While we usually conceive of the verb 'learning' as a *transitive verb* in the sense that we always learn 'something', Cavell seems to be indicating here that for Wittgenstein the verb 'learning' is strangely enough not only transitive, but also constitutive: the processes of learning 'produce' 'names', 'wishes', 'fathers'. So the learning itself is constitutive of what has been learned, and constitutes our ontologies.[52] What exists in my world can only do so thanks to my having acquired *forms of life*.

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52 Cavell's analysis helps us to see that *every* form of initiation into new language-games involves the constitution of (partly) new ontologies. Children are initiated into existing forms of life, nothing new seems to happen there. Adults can be initiated into existing forms of life too, but as we will see later on, in the case of WBC something more is happening: *new* (supposedly universal) ontologies are propagated through the process of initiation and thus ontologies are changing.

> I have wanted to say: Kittens – what we call 'kittens' – do not exist in her [Cavell's three-year-old daughter, at the time] world yet, she has not acquired the forms of life that contain them. They do not exist in something like the way cities and mayors will not exist in her world until long after pumpkins and kittens do (…). (Cavell 1999, 172)

So we could say that *initiation into forms of life* is also conceivable as an initiation into certain 'grammars' or 'logics'. The logics we have been initiated into reside mostly in the background. They form systems of what one does not doubt, what is self-evident, the 'obvious'. Once these 'foundations of our language-games' have been articulated and uttered, they do not contain nor convey any knowledge; they tell us nothing new. These propositions in fact look awkward, almost too obvious. But if we can imagine a use for them in daily life, the awkwardness disappears. Many have a use in situations of teaching and learning, and thus as instructions (cf. Wittgenstein 1969, §36). Often these propositions *look like* empirical propositions that describe states-of-affairs in the world, though Wittgenstein discovered that the role they play in our language games is a very different one. Propositions such as 'The earth existed for a long time before my birth' are in fact, as Wittgenstein believes, not empirical propositions that describe a state of affairs in the outside world, but are articulations of the foundations of our world-picture or of *that which stands fast for us*. It does not make sense to announce that one *knows* these facts, as Moore did, since they are not facts, but articulate what we have to consider beyond doubt in order to make it possible for facts to be known.

A dynamic account of 'what is beyond doubt'

Wittgenstein talks about the '*unmoving foundations* of our language-games', or uses the simile of propositions being like 'hinges' on which a door turns (1969, §341, §343, §655), and so stresses the need for a certain semantic stability. In addition, *On Certainty* is a work on logic.

So aren't things rather static in a Wittgensteinian account? I don't believe they are. First, no proposition can be called an empirical proposition or a 'methodological' proposition as he calls them sometimes (for instance §318-321) outside a context of use. Furthermore, for Wittgenstein the domain of what is beyond doubt seems to be ever shifting, and not the same for everyone, or in any timeframe. Propositions that were once empirical, have become 'propositions that are beyond doubt', others were once 'methodological', and have become empirical again.

Wittgenstein's vision of these particular propositions is a very dynamic one, as is pointed out by Hamilton (2014, 104-109). As the riverbed simile clarifies,[53] some of our propositions are very solid, and can hardly change – on another occasion (§492 and §512) he suggests that they are un-revisable – , still hard rock can become sand and vice versa.

> 94. But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.
>
> 95. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.
>
> 96. It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels

53 It is good to remind oneself of the remark Wittgenstein made concerning his use of similes in the Chapter 'Philosophy' of the Big Typescript which he constructed in 1933.
'(A simile is part of our edifice; but we cannot draw any conclusions from it either; it doesn't lead us beyond itself, but must remain standing as a simile. We can draw no inferences from it. (...) Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.)' (*1993*, 177)
The word edifice was underlined, meaning that Wittgenstein was not sure of it (*1993*, 158).

> for the empirical propositions that were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. [Altered translation.]
>
> 97. The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.
>
> 98. But if someone were to say 'So logic too is an empirical science' he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing.
>
> 99. And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited.

Wittgenstein believes many discoveries have become part of what he calls *the scaffolding of our thoughts* (1969, §211). In the words of Philips (Rhees 2003, 155):

> (…) in some cases, what is now accepted without question, was arrived at as a result of an investigation, for example, that every skull contains a brain. What is true is that once discovered, it becomes part of what Wittgenstein calls the scaffolding of our thought, such that no one would doubt that every skull contains a brain.

Wittgenstein would accept 'scaffolding' (at least in English) to be something that is *happening* and that is reversible in time as the 'river-bank simile' shows.

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein does not elaborate the idea of *how something becomes a part of the scaffolding of our thought*. He returns to mathematics (see Wittgenstein 1969, §210-212).

> 210. Much seems to be fixed, and it is removed from the traffic. It is so to speak shunted to an unused siding.
>
> 211. Now it gives our way of looking at things, and our researches, their form. Perhaps it was once disputed. But perhaps for unthinkable ages, it has belonged to the *scaffolding* of our thoughts. (Every human has parents.)
>
> 212. In certain circumstances, for example, we regard a calculus as sufficiently checked. What gives us a right to do so? Experience? May that not have deceived us? Somewhere we must be finished with justification, and then there remains the proposition that this is how we calculate.

This is reminiscent of some passages in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Wittgenstein, 1978, 308-311):

> 22. Now someone says that in the series of cardinal numbers that obeys the rule +1, the technique of which was taught to us in such-and-such a way, 450 succeeds 449. That is not the empirical proposition that we come from 449 to 450 when it strikes us that we have applied the operation +1 to 499. Rather it is a stipulation that only when the result is 450 have we applied this operation.
>
> It is as if we had hardened the empirical proposition into a rule. And now we have, not an hypothesis that gets tested by experience, but a paradigm with which experience is compared and judged. And so a new kind of judgment. (1978, 324, underlining mine)

23. (…) The justification of the proposition 25x25=625 is, naturally, that if anyone has been trained in such-and-such a way, then under normal circumstances he gets 625 as the result of multiplying 25 by 25. But the arithmetical proposition does not assert *that*. It is so to speak an empirical proposition hardened into a rule. It stipulates that the rule has been followed only when it is the result of the multiplication. It is thus withdrawn from being checked by experience, but now serves as a paradigm for judging experience.

If we want to make practical use of a calculation, we convince ourselves that it has been 'worked out right', that the *correct* result has been obtained. And there can only be *one* correct result of (e.g.) the multiplication; it doesn't depend on what you get when you *apply* the calculation. Thus we judge the facts by the aid of the calculation and quite differently from the way in which we would do so, if we did not regard the result of the calculation as something determined for all. (1978, 235, underlining mine)

Wittgenstein offers indeed a more elaborated account of these 'processes' of the hardening of an empirical proposition into a rule in his *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, where he uses the image of 'going in a circle'. Let us imagine a child that learns to count and discovers that 2 + 3 gives 5. And then:

7. (…) Could he say: 'What I have seen was very impressive. I have drawn a conclusion from it. In future I shall …'?

(E.g.: In future I shall always calculate like *this*.)

He tells us: 'I saw that it must be like that.'

'I realised that it must be like that' – that is his report.

(…)

But he does not say: I realised that *this* happens. Rather; that it must be like that. This 'must' shews what kind of lesson he has drawn from the scene.

This 'must' shews that he has gone in a circle.

I decide to see things like *this*. And so, to act in such-and-such a way.

I imagine that whoever sees the process also draws a moral from it.

'It must be so' means that this outcome has been defined to be essential to this process.

8. This *must* shews that he has adopted a concept.

This *must* signifies that he has gone in a circle.

He has read off from the process, not a proposition of natural science but, instead of that, the determination of a concept.

Let concept here mean method. In contrast to the application of the method.

9. (…) 'If we put 3 things by 2 things, that may yield various counts of things. But we see as a *norm* the procedure that 3 things and 2 things make 5 things. See, this is how it looks when they make 5.'

Moyal-Sharrock (2007, 229) quotes Crispin Wright[54]: 'What is novel in *On Certainty* is the extension [of the suggestion that such propositions are best viewed as rules] to propositions outside logic and mathematics, propositions which we should not normally deem to be capable of being known a priori but which have instead, as Wittgenstein says, the appearance of empirical propositions'. I believe there

54 Cf. also Williams 1999, 297, note 12.

are good reasons to accept this extension also where it concerns the 'fossilization of empirical propositions into rules' outside the domain of mathematics, and that the same similes might be used here too.

The 'liminality' of propositions: the changing of language-games 'caught in the act'

Looking into parenting manuals such as WBC, we can say that parents are initiated into new language-games or logics. The ideas (propositions) that are presented to parents *seem* to be empirical propositions, but in fact they function as methodological or rule-like propositions. Empirical propositions can be true or false, they can be verified empirically: one can convince oneself of their correctness. But parents are not supposed to verify these insights. They are invited rather to treat them as methodological or rule-like propositions. In other words, to use them as a way of looking at the world, or as frameworks.[55]

For instance, the (implicit) proposition 'The level of integration of the child's brain is decisive for parenting outcomes' is intended to function as something one does not (or should not?) doubt in the new logic/language-game parents are initiated into. To use some of Wittgenstein's well-known images, we could state that this proposition functions as *an axis*: 'This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility.' (1969, §152) or as a *foundation wall that is supported by the whole house* (1969, §248). And this is precisely what is demanded from parents in WBC: that they organize their parental behavior around this proposition. It should support everything they do and everything they do as parents should support it.

55 Cf. Hamilton 2014, 4: (-) 'Moorean propositions function more like a kind of *framework* within which genuinely empirical propositions operate.' (*emphasis mine*)

Some readers of the book may of course take a proposition as *parenting is the wiring and rewiring of a child's brain*, as an empirical statement, and thus as a proposition that has a truth value. But the authors of WBC – as educators would[56] – seem to want *parents* to accept this and other propositions as being obviously true, to stand fast for them and so they use them rather as instructions.

At this point I should notice that this account might be too static. Although the content of the book is presented as reporting recent discoveries of what has always been the case, what is happening is very dynamic. With WBC, we seem to be in the middle of *the riverbed analogy*, as it presents itself as a case of transition or 'liminality'. The propositions at hand seem to have rather a 'liminal' or candidate-status, in the sense that they *might* become propositions that play a 'methodological' or 'rule-like' role too, or they *might not;* they *might* become part of the scaffolding of our thoughts, or they *might not*. This means that parents (or other adults) *can* 'go in a circle' and learn –to use another example – that it *must* be so that 'the integration of a child's brain is decisive for parenting outcomes'. This 'going in a circle' is a description of a crucial aspect of what happens in the process of initiation, whether it concerns an infant (a novice) learning its mother tongue, or the learning by adults of other languages and language-games. This means, that we, in a Cavellian sense, can say that their ontologies change. This also means that we are looking into propositions of which at least some are somewhere in between, because they do not function as empirical propositions do, and neither do they function as rule-like propositions yet, at least not for many people.[57] When language-games are changing, some of the propositions haven't yet hardened into rules or methodological propositions. That explains

56 This point raises a whole other set of issues about education that lie beyond the scope of this chapter; for instance, about the significance of the pedagogical intent and relationship; or about whether there is some necessary (developmental?) stage in any educational process which involves this intentional initiation into foundational logics.

57 For Wittgenstein, unlike for Moore, a proposition can stand fast for me and many others, not necessarily for everyone: Instead of 'I know …', couldn't Moore have said: 'It stands fast for me that …'? And further: 'It stands fast for me and many others…' (1969, §116)

why many are still *mentioned*. They are in the middle of the process of hardening, or not. They might become generally accepted, or not.

Framework propositions usually do not seem to be worth mentioning, because they are so obvious that they 'go without saying', and if they are mentioned it often happens 'en passant',[58] but here we have many propositions that apparently *do seem* worth mentioning. Since the context at hand is one of teaching and thus learning, this is another reason why the obvious has to be mentioned: in contexts of learning very often what is obvious for an educator is typically not (yet) for the pupil. It would be hard for us to remember the time when 2x2=4 wasn't obvious to us yet, but was something we still could 'discover'. In the approach exemplified by WBC, parents are initiated into what is obvious, and as in other learning situations, it is hoped for that certain propositions will eventually be beyond doubt.

First, some individuals might 'have gone in a circle', and begin to take them for granted, but eventually a whole community or society might 'have gone in a circle' concerning certain certainties, or they might not. Here we see how parents are initiated into new frameworks, but unlike the initiation of children into their mother's tongue, here at the same time new frameworks are propagated. Their discoverers want them to become universalized, because for them these certainties are universal. The authors of *WBC* seem to want parents to accept certain propositions as being so obvious, that they don't seem to be worth mentioning anymore.

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58 Compare Camarata (2015, 42): *Because your goal as a parent is to wire your child's brain* for real-life-thinking, the latest findings from neuroscience, based on the narrow bits of behaviour scientists use to isolate minute brain circuits in the lab, may not be very useful to you. *(italics mine)*
The italicized part of this quotation from *The Intuitive Parent* illustrates how the idea that parenting boils down to the wiring of the brain is already treated as if it belongs to the scaffolding of our thinking about parenting.

A science-based conversion?

Instead of being provided with morally neutral scientific knowledge or information, I believe, in the exemplary case of WBC, parents are initiated into new logics, new language-games. This may have far-reaching consequences. The next remark by Wittgenstein can provide some insight:

> If we imagine the facts otherwise than they are, certain language-games lose some of their importance, while others become important. And in this way there is an alternation – a gradual one – in the use of the vocabulary of a language. (1969, §63)

WBC offers an example of this changing of language-games: parents are invited at least to *imagine the facts*[59] *otherwise*.

> 'The upstairs brain weighs different options.'

Parents, on this account, should acknowledge the fact that it is not their child, but her upstairs brain that weighs options. This is a subjectivization of the upstairs brain: it becomes the (grammatical) subject in a sentence.

> 'A parent connects with his/her child's brain.'

Parents shouldn't connect with their child directly, but through connecting their brains. A parent is quoted:

59 Parents are given exact instructions about for instance how they should conceive of memory: 'That's how memory works. One experience (the end of ballet class) causes certain neurons to fire, and those neurons can get wired to neurons from another experience (getting bubble gum). Then each time we undergo the first experience, our brain connects it with the second one. Thus, when ballet ends, our brain triggers an expectation of getting gum.' (WBC, 69) What seems to be implied is that it is the brain, and not the child, that is the cause of wanting bubble gum. Regardless of whether the account is true or not, parents are asked to imagine things differently.

> 'Recently, I learned about trying to connect emotionally first – right brain to right brain, which was totally foreign to me'. (WBC, 36)

In 'the entire system of our language-games' (Wittgenstein 1969, §411) a shift seems to be 'proposed' from understanding and interpreting to explanation,[60] from engaging with one's child as a person to engaging with the brain of one's child, from having a relationship with one's child, to conceiving of this relationship as the interaction between brains, and even as the manufacturing of the child's brain, and so on.

Now for Wittgenstein, imagining the facts to be otherwise entails that some of our language-games become important, while others lose some of their importance. Language-games are not superficial. Changing one's language-games means changing one's way of going about in the world, changes one's ways of acting, thinking, of what one is convinced of, of what one can give reports about, of what one values.

In *On Certainty* there is also another famous remark:

> (…) why should not a king have been brought up in the belief that the world began with him? And if Moore and this king were to meet and discuss, could Moore really prove his belief to be the right one? I do not say that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way. (…) (§92)

When parents are not taught to look differently at certain facts, within their own familiar frameworks, but *when their frameworks are changed*, they are converted (or not) to a new logic, in the Wittgensteinian sense

60 The Belgian child psychiatrist Adriaenssens (2010, 18-19) explains the aggressive behaviour of a schoolboy in terms of neurology and endocrinology. What gets lost is being interested in the story of the boy: What made him so upset? Not in terms of the functioning of parts of his brain, but in terms of how he understands himself, or of what he deems important and so on. Ramaekers and Suissa (2012, 20-21) made a similar point, using the same example: such explanations do not give real answers to educators.

of the word. WBC is a book that is particularly reminiscent of religious ideas of conversion. Promises are made. If parents accept this new 'belief', it will be possible to almost create a heaven on earth. Children who have been parented this way will be able to enjoy meaningful relationships, they will be caring and compassionate, they will do well at school, they will work hard and be responsible, and they will feel good about who they are (WBC, vii). Another promise is that parents will be able to knead or mould their children's brain and hence personality by manipulating their experiences, in the sense that bad parenting experiences (from the viewpoint of the parents) will become unique occasions to help their children thrive (WBC, viii)! The turnabout that is demanded from parents can be conceived of as a conversion, in the sense that one leaves behind an allegedly irrational belief system to exchange it for another one, not on the basis of rational arguments, but rather on the basis of persuasion.

The indispensability of trust

At least some of the propositions parents are implicitly provided with are (candidate) framework or methodological propositions, that are supposed to be beyond doubt, and though they appear to be very central and important, they don't provide any information or knowledge, anyway not in the admittedly somewhat narrow sense of knowledge Wittgenstein uses.[61] If we indeed accept that many of the seemingly empirical propositions provided by experts (in this case the authors of WBC) are non-empirical, which means parents are not supposed to convince themselves of their truth by verifying them, and parents are

61 Cf. Hamilton 2014, 39: 'Wittgenstein's view is that unless it is logically possible to doubt the claim – that is, unless doubting makes sense – then it cannot be an object of knowledge.' Hamilton believes for Wittgenstein 'KILPOD' holds: 'knowledge implies the logical possibility of doubt'. Wittgenstein seems not to allow the use of the verb 'to know' at bedrock level (cf. 1969, §495 and 498). If we loosen the constraints Wittgenstein puts onto the use of the word 'knowledge', we could indeed say that 'we know that everyone has parents'. But we do not know this because we have verified it, but because we relied on our parents and other adults, and because we continue to rely on our language-games and thus our communal practices.

invited to include them in their belief systems (Wittgenstein, 1969, §141, §144) *about parenting*, then this means that parents are required to put their trust in these experts.

If we look at trust amongst adults, then we notice that it implies as a necessary condition that not everything is known beforehand, as Han notices:

> Trust means establishing a positive relationship with the other, even in ignorance. It makes actions possible despite one's lack of knowledge. If I know everything in advance, there is no need for trust. (Han 2015, 47, altered translation)

I believe Han's observation helps to understand the strange runaway situation parenting support seems to have ended up in: in an effort to strengthen parents' self-confidence, they are supplied with scientific 'information'. But since knowing more does not necessarily lead to trusting more or being more confident, but again demands trust as a condition, more information is still given, while parents do not become more sure of themselves.[62] Anyway, as we saw, although the alleged lack of parental confidence is answered with more 'information and knowledge', at the heart of science-based parenting support it is still *trust* (at least in the sense of 'relying on') that is at work, or at least that has to do the work.

But, the trust that is demanded from parents resembles an infantile form of trust. Children, while being initiated in their parents' language-games and forms of life, acquire mastery over 'bedrock practices', for instance counting or reading, and cannot but be blindly obedient (Williams 1999, 183). To believe that they could resist or doubt what

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62 Symptomatic of this tendency is Camarata (2015) who in his book *The intuitive parent* tries to reassure parents who became less confident after reading brain-based parenting advice, that they are *naturally* provided with the skills which enable them to do all the necessary wiring- and rewiring of their children's brains. He then supports this claim with further scientific findings stemming from the same brain-science.

their parents say is a bit (but not wholly) like making the mistake of the sceptic in *On Certainty* who believes that it is possible to doubt *everything*. Wittgenstein argues that doubting everything is not logically conceivable. To be able to doubt, at least some things have to be certain,[63] or have to have been acquired. To learn to speak/count/read and so on, also requires a form of relying on community practices and those who mastered these practices, the adults. This is not the same kind of trust or confidence that adults have in each other. When adults trust each other, for instance when someone makes a promise, the other one can decide whether or not to place their confidence in the one who made the promise and to trust them. In the latter case an element of choice is involved, and thus an element of responsibility. Adults can always review this decision to trust someone and go back on it.

We could say that what happens in science-based parenting support is the confusion of these two states. Parents, though they are adults, are regarded as novices (infants): they should unquestioningly trust the experts, and this trust or confidence is modelled along the lines of the learning of bedrock practices. Blind obedience and blind trust is demanded.[64] The drawing on scientific evidence and alleged scientific certainties indeed seems to suspend the normal situation between adults, where one has to decide to trust another adult. It is as if the experts are saying: 'You can trust what I say is *scientifically* founded. So I couldn't possibly be lying to you. You can trust me as if we were in a parent-child relation.'

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63 Wittgenstein (1969, §115): "If you tried to doubt everything you would not go as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty." Cf. also Hamilton 2014 from page 227 on.

64 One could make the (obvious) point that parents are not dependent on the parenting experts in quite the same way as children are dependent on adults; they can choose not to buy the parenting books, not to read the magazines; not to watch the TV programs. And this is my point: once they accept to read the book, readers are no longer supposed to be critical of it, they are supposed to behave in a way as infants.

Concluding remarks

In Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, we can experience a shift from knowing to trusting, in the sense that our basic certainties are not derived from knowledge, but from a relying on our language- games and world pictures we could not possibly escape from.

In this chapter I have suggested that we can draw on this picture in thinking about recent trends in parenting support of which WBC is paradigmatic. Parents are (as with a conversion) asked to rely blindly on new language-games. They are demanded to trust those who propagate this new way of seeing the world, this is, also to see themselves and their children in new and *promising* ways. It is not so much that they receive new scientific evidence; rather, they are provided with new frameworks; they are asked to comply with them, and to accept their logics.

We do not know yet whether these candidate-methodological propositions will become part of the scaffolding of our thoughts, and will actually come to stand fast for us. What we can conclude is that if parents accept these frameworks, this will probably change the ways they normally think about parenting and behave as parents, and that this may even change their *moral* horizons. Because all this happens as it were behind their backs, parents are put in a position of infants, who do not have the resources to take a critical stance towards these forms of 'science-based' parenting support and their propagated conceptualizations of parenting.

Wittgenstein's holist and non-epistemic 'foundationalism' implies that we have to rely on others and our community. Maybe that is Wittgenstein's lesson: certainty implies trusting, relying on [*sich verlassen*], rather than knowing. The emphasis on knowledge does not do away with the fact that trust is needed; this only *seems* to be the case: it is still *trust* that has to do the work. The emphasis on scientific (epistemic) certainty might obscure what parents really need: not so much more knowledge, for instance more 'facts' about the way brains work

or develop, but rather more recognition for their desire to be addressed as adults, who will and should always be doubting; and that their doubting is accepted as something for which no cure is available, or even desirable.

CHAPTER 4

From fiction to friction: Towards an ethics of hermeneutics in parent counselling

From fiction to friction: Towards an ethics of hermeneutics in parent counselling[65]

Introduction

Reading parenting websites and manuals as well as the literature that critically engages with parenting and parenting support, important distinctions often seem to be lacking, for instance between parent*ing* support and parent support, or between parenting, as an active and technical endeavour, and *being* a parent, as an existential condition, or between the expert who tries to explain versus the counsellor who tries to understand, and so on. This chapter seeks to positively contribute to the field of parent(ing) support as well as to scholarship in this field by articulating some perhaps until now rather underdeveloped aspects of the discussion on parent(ing) support. As a starting point, I accept the overall consensus that parents are in need of support, construed in a very broad way[66], whereas the 'parental deficit' is predominantly narrowly conceived of as a lack of theoretical and practical knowledge. By questioning the nature of the 'parental deficit', the predominant technical parenting account can no longer be taken for granted either, and a space is opened to develop new ways of understanding what supporting parents should be about.

65 This chapter is a slightly revised version of the article with the same title that has been published in *Ethics and Education, Vol. 11, 3, 259-273.*

66 This could encompass things like policies on better child-care and parental leave, help from friends and family members, etc.

A technical account of parenting

In many parenting websites or manuals, a technical account of parenting seems to be taken for granted. Furedi (2008) traces its roots back to the nineteenth century when the idea gained strength that mothering and fathering were a distinct skill that could help develop the character traits necessary for a successful life, or, if absent, could 'deprive the child of a positive future' (102). Furedi refers to this latter phenomenon as 'parental determinism' (Furedi 2014, viii). He believes that the rise of modern individualized nuclear family arrangements and the conviction that children are the responsibility of a mother and father rather than of a larger community, gave the idea of modern parenting an extra boost (102), and 'once *children* were perceived as the more or less direct *product of parenting*, the status enjoyed by mothers and fathers became more intimately linked with the development of their children' (103 *emphasis mine*). In Furedi's view, parenting is culturally conceived of as a more or less insulated domain of parent-child interactions: 'There is an important divergence between the private and public value of children. (…) [T]he sentimentalization of childhood often stops at the family's doorstep' (118). Smedts (2008) points out that parenting and parenting support are symptomatic of a Heideggerian *Enframing*. She contends 'parents are easily seduced into becoming mere executioners of technologizaton' (122). Drawing on Lambeir and Ramaekers (2007) she claims the identity of parents is linked to 'doing something', is about an 'activity'. Parents are educational entrepreneurs, who 'are expected to enhance their knowledge and skills in order to be called responsible or good parents' (Smedts 2008,126). In her account of the history of parenting, Lee (2014) stresses the fact that there has been an evolution from a more ambiguous idea that accepted that, next to scientific input, folk knowledge or maternal or parental 'instinct' rightly had its place, to the more recent development where there is no longer a place for 'instinct', which means that parenting implies as a necessary condition the input from parenting experts.

So in the current predominant conceptualization, 'parenting' is seen as a set of skills that not only *can* be taught, but *has to be* taught. Parenting and parenting support are like two sides of the same coin: one couldn't be conceived of without the other. This seems almost too obvious, taken from the side of parenting support, but taken from the other side this is less self-evident: parents cannot parent unless they act in concert with parenting experts. Parenting has *as a necessary supplement and condition* parenting support[67].

Supporting parents, or parenting?

The initiatives taken to help parents out in fact take very different forms[68]. This means that, if we follow Wittgenstein's advice and look, instead of think (Wittgenstein 1958, §66), we will notice there are countless differences: for instance, parent counselling in the case of a child diagnosed with a mental condition such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Autism Spectrum Disorder; parents supporting each other on a practical level online and offline; information sessions about all kinds of parenting issues; meeting places; parenting websites; parenting manuals; books for parents that explicitly distance themselves from ordinary parenting advice literature; podcasts and so on.

The whole range of initiatives comprised by the term 'parenting support' can be divided along different lines. For instance, one dividing line can be drawn between support given by professionals, and support given by other parents. The last category can be divided again into spontaneous forms of support amongst parents and more or less facilitated or organized forms of support, for instance in so-called 'meeting places'[69]. A second possible criterion is whether there are

67 I will further refer to it as the 'parenting (support) account'.

68 Hermanns (2014) deals with the difficulty to give a definition of parenting support.

69 Ramaekers (2010) remarks that often professionals (psychologists) in fact take over or supervise the meeting of parents with each other, which means borders between categories of parenting support are sometimes fuzzy.

more serious problems or whether the initiative is meant for every parent. Another dividing line might be drawn between initiatives where parents actually meet professionals and others where the experts do not get involved in the lives of individual parents, and as such remain a bit 'abstract' and often anonymous. If we use a material criterion, we could further say that some initiatives are on the Internet, while others are offline publications, such as books and so on. On the level of content, some are just offering advice, others give a kind of meta-advice (for instance Furedi 2008 and Camarata 2015) and still others do not give any advice at all[70].

The dividing line I want to focus on here however is the one that divides the whole set of instances of 'support' into two domains: namely, initiatives that are parent-focused and support *parents*, versus those that are parenting-focused and thus support *parenting*. This is a conceptual difference that does not neatly class all these initiatives into two categories[71]. But three points are decisive: first the *aim* of the initiative, second the way it specifies the *deficit* that allegedly is at the core of parenthood and is partly constitutive of it, and third the way it determines how to deal with this deficit. I want to look into the second category first, and will later return to the first one.

Parenting-focused support *aims at improving processes of parenting* on the level of parent-child interactions, more precisely by intervening in these processes of which the parent is often not aware, and where she needs additional information and practical advice to execute her task better, and as such boils down to a form of *technical support*. Parenting support thus implies a conceptualization of parenting as consisting of concrete physical and psychological interactions with the child. Furthermore, *parenting*-focused support will typically try to

70 Cf. Van Bockel (2009), who in her autobiographical account of living with a daughter diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder gives an insight in the daily challenges of a mother.

71 It would require some empirical research to ensure that the first category is not empty. A recent study on 'parenting support' in Europe, has the significant and paradoxical title *Think parents! Putting parents at the heart of parenting support.* (Fukkink, Vink and Bosscher 2014)

modify parental behaviour, and will argue for these modifications by referring to knowledge that is not immediately accessible to parents under the form of 'instinct or 'folk knowledge', drawing from different scientific fields. In this technical conception parenting has a lack of knowledge as its constituting *deficit*, and parenting experts need to supply this knowledge. Even if the advice given is about everyday communication (instead of hormonal or neurological or even epigenetic mechanisms) between parents and their children, as in Faber and Mazlish's *How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk*. (2012 [1980]), a causal-mechanical logic is used: if one does 'a', the child will do 'b'[72]. Although parents, on this view, do not need to understand or work out why this is the case, and just need to trust the expert, often a great deal of effort is invested in helping them to understand, so as to give them insights into the mechanics of parenting. To sum up, the parenting focused initiatives aim at improving processes of parenting, define the parental deficit as an epistemic deficit and try to deal with this deficit by providing knowledge, at the level of theoretical insight as well as at the level of practical know-how. Parenting and parenting expertise are like two sides of the same coin, or are like Siamese twins, who differ from each other, but cannot survive without each other. This conception of parenting defines a deficit in the parents: knowledge, or insight in the mechanics of child rearing, as well as the know-how to apply this theoretical knowledge to everyday situations.

Parenting as a frictionless fiction

In the next sections I will try to develop an account of *parent focused support*. This will be a view of what such support requires, regardless of the question whether these practices do exist. Let us pause and have a look at the way Letourneau explains the use of examples in her book *The Science of Parenting*:

72 Cf. Ramaekers and Suissa, 2012, 36.

> The anecdotes found throughout the book, we should note, are fictional. They don't represent the experiences of any one real person or family, but are cobbled together from 20 years of professional experience. Their purpose is to illustrate, through narrative, the theories this book discusses, to pin a human face to the numbers and conclusions of scientific studies. Sophie may not exist, but I (Nicole) can assure you that people like her do. (Letourneau 2013, 25)

And in a note, she further clarifies:

> We are referring only to the third-person narratives used to illustrate certain principles. Stories regarding scientific studies and historical events are true (Ibid. 243).

So 'fiction' here means on the one hand *not real*, or *not true*, and on the other hand almost more than 'real', or perhaps even 'too good to be true'. Although there obviously are good reasons not to use real parents' and children's stories, I believe this fictionalizing of examples and even persons might be symptomatic of a deeper fictional nature of the parent*ing* (support) account.

Indeed, within the *parenting* (support) framework, difficulties can be explained and solved, outcomes can be identified and reached, advice can and has to be given, steps can be taken, causal-mechanical logics are acceptable and moreover, even self-evident; in short, everything is crystal clear. We could refer here to a famous simile Wittgenstein uses:

> We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground! (Wittgenstein, 1958, I, §107)

Whereas the later Wittgenstein believed that the language conception he adhered to in his *Tractatus* was in a sense too mechanical, too simple, and, I would like to add, too fictional, something analogous

also goes for the predominant parenting (support) account. It should not come as a surprise that the aforementioned image of parenting resides mostly in parenting manuals and parenting websites, i.e. forms of parenting support where parents and counsellors do not actually meet, which means that the idea(l)s of parenting are not slowed down by the stubborn and sticky quality of the lived experiences of the upbringing of one's children. One does not need to appeal to the faculty of practical judgement so as to apply the universal to particular cases (Neiman 2014, 192). Parenting seems to be a fiction that has become inevitably attractive for us. But what turns this account into a fiction? And why is it so attractive?

We could say that it is precisely the fact that it becomes *frictionless* that turns it into a fiction: everything that slows things down, for instance, hesitating, deliberation, human judging (the weighing up of pros and cons), everything that can't immediately be resolved, everything that cannot be thought in a linear and straightforward manner (and so on), disappears. Or to put it positively: it is fictional because of several characteristics, that are not always present to the same extent. To sum up (not exhaustively):

1. This parenting (support) account is fictional *insofar as* it construes parents and children as belonging to the *physical world of nature* only, or at least primarily. This means that the fact that parents and children are human beings that are characterized, as Heidegger remarked, by being-in-the-world, or that they are self- interpreting subjects, to put it in Taylorian terms, is ignored.

2. It is fictional *insofar as* it devises a certain 'space', a cocoon-like world of 'interactions' between a parent and their child(ren), that seems very cosy and safe as it shuts out the 'real' world lying outside this intimate sphere, with its socio-economic, racial, (geo-)political

problems and challenges[73]. It construes a 'parenting interface' where parents do not so much *live* with their children, but where they (can) causally influence them; where they apply techniques and exercise skills and so on.

3. This parenting (support) account is fictional *insofar as* it sees sciences as a source of *absolute* certainty, and not as one of the possible resources parents can rely on, like for instance experience, stories they hear from other parents, growing personal insight, and so on. Indeed, the fact that the technical parenting (support) account allegedly is founded on '(hard) sciences' doesn't necessarily make it less fictional, since the methodological doubt that is characteristic of serious scientific practices seems to be completely forgotten in the parenting (support) account, where scientific findings are presented as hard facts, leaving no room for doubt. Knowledge claims, in the form of 'we now know that' are very common, whereas a more modest, and perhaps more serious scientist[74] would accept that every scientific claim is in principle open to corroboration or falsification.

4. It is also fictional *insofar as* it only picks out certain parental problems and difficulties, most often behavioural problems, ignoring that what we have here is maybe best thought of as an example of family resemblances. How to deal with a toddler that throws a temper tantrum is quite different from the question of how to deal with a teenager that wants to be a vegetarian, or that openly sympathizes with a

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73 At the time of writing this, the Brexit vote has just taken place in the UK; in Belgium, we are recovering from the 3/22 terrorist attacks in Brussels, and expecting the return of Syria fighters. But this all escapes the parenting focus. Of course, immediately after the terrorist attacks in Brussels on 22/3/2016, parenting experts on TV and in the newspapers, were giving advice aimed precisely at keep parents and children in this sphere safe. It is only in such extreme cases that the 'real world' apparently threatens to intrude and accordingly has to be dealt with.

74 Cf. Willingham (2012, 87) who quotes the astronomer Carl Sagan: 'In science it often happens that scientists say, "You know that's a really good argument; my position is mistaken", and then they actually change their minds and you never hear that old view from them again. They really do it. It doesn't happen as often as it should, because scientists are human and change is sometimes painful. But it happens every day. I cannot recall the last time something like that happened in politics or religion.'

racist political party. Problems need to be identifiable within scientific frameworks that parents are not (at least at the outset) acquainted with. Often it is taken for granted that children's behaviour can be dealt with using Learning Theory (positive and negative reinforcement) to diminish undesirable behaviour or to increase desired behaviour (cf. Camarata 2015, 191 ff.).[75]

5. It is fictional *insofar as* parental doubting is ignored. Within the interactional parenting domain, problems can be identified and can be solved. There is no room for nor acknowledgement of the parental experience that sometimes there are no answers to be given.

Why is it attractive? The parenting (support) account promises a firm hold or grip on the elusive domain of education and upbringing. Although a whole domain of educational experiences cannot be captured by explanatory theories, many allegedly are captured and explained by them. As a fiction we could call it *science*(-based) *fiction*, preferably based on hard sciences: see for instance *The Whole-Brain Child* (Siegel and Bryson 2011), where science offers supposedly firm ground. Furthermore, there is a very engaging optimism and voluntarism at work in many parenting support manuals or websites[76]. Of course many parents experience all kinds of *behavioural* challenges, which are treated extensively in books like *How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk*; but this doesn't exhaust the range of difficulties parents can experience. For instance, problems that are connected with the fact that not only becoming and being a parent can and will change their self-understanding deeply and often disturbingly, or that it can induce anxiety and Angst, or that it can put them amidst

75 Taylor (2016, 7) extensively argues that human beings are language animals and hence cannot be reduced to 'rats in a maze'. The technical account seems to confuse children with non-linguistic animals.

76 Just a randomly taken example of this optimism taken from a website of the Government of South-Australia: 'Dads are very important in children's lives. *Dads can* spend time with children, *help them to learn about culture* [and] *have a strong identity as an Aboriginal person*. However you were brought up, *you can be the kind of dad you want to be for your children*.' (http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au/peg_aboriginal_list.htm#peg190 *emphasis mine*)

of moral dilemmas, and so on, stay out of the *centre* of attention[77]. We could interpret this in the sense that this account helps parents to escape the existential urge that can arise to 'own' their lives and confront the Heideggerian *Angst*[78], and, as Ramaekers and Suissa (2012) point out, drawing upon Bauman, to 'dissolve' it into small surveyable tasks[79]. By leaving all the decisions in the hand of an expert, who refers to 'hard sciences', parents might be said to be relieved of a huge responsibility. The attractiveness of parenting as a fiction might be that it promises to solve every problem while at best solving only the practical and behavioural ones, or to put it differently: it transforms the insoluble existential deficit into a knowledge deficit that allegedly can be completely dealt with. It promises answers where none are to be given.

Shifting the attention from the expert to the parent

Clearly the experts know lots of things most parents never heard of, drawing upon scientific findings from different fields, but also from practical everyday psychology (cf. Faber and Mazlish 2012 [1980]) and they also supposedly know what parents should do. Parents only have to obey and execute their tasks. This scheme, where knowledge and execution are strictly separated, has a long history in Western political thought. Dunne (1993, 91) refers to the distinction Arendt highlights in *The Human Condition* between *archein* (beginning) and *prattein* (achieving), which belonged before Plato to the same category, namely 'action'.

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77 At least in the technical parenting (support) account. The idea of *becoming* a mother as posing a major challenge to one's sense of self and identity is so common as to be almost ubiquitous in both first-person accounts of motherhood, feminist literature, and academic work on parenting identities. (Thanks to Judith Suissa for pointing this out.)

78 See Chapter 1, 51-53; Van den Berge 2013, pp. 398-399.

79 '[T]he existential anxiety, in the face of the enormity of the reality of 'being a parent' is broken down into a series of well-defined tasks: establishing sleeping routines, toilet raining, controlling meal-time behaviour, etc., and replaced by focused anxiety over whether one is succeeding at performing these tasks well. Thus, the various techniques of good parenting are offered as 'solutions' to reduce parental anxiety. (...) [T]he potential of 'perfect parenting' becomes a real vision: If one only can do it right, maybe one can dispel, once and for all, the anxiety.' (128)

> Theoretically, the most brief and most fundamental version of the escape from action into rule occurs in the *Statesman*, where Plato opens a gulf between the two modes of action, *archein* and *prattein* ('beginning' and 'achieving'), which according to Greek understanding were interconnected. (…) Plato was the first to introduce the division between those who know and do not act and those who act and do not know, instead of the old articulation of action into beginning and achieving, so that knowing what to do and doing it became two altogether different performances. (Arendt 1998, 222-223)

The sundering of action into these two domains led to a *hierarchical* account of politics, where some 'know, but do not act' and others 'act, but do not know'. Analogously, the parenting experts stand in a higher hierarchical position as they 'know, but do not act', while parents 'act, but do not know'. Experts do not act; that is, they do not get involved personally, they keep their distance, typically as authors of parenting manuals or sometimes even anonymous authors of parenting websites, but often also when meeting clients, where they try to keep a 'professional' distance. And parents should be prepared to execute experts' wisdom. This means that within the parenting (support) account, parental acting isn't acting in the full (ancient Greek) sense of the word. In order to create *parental momentum*, or to allow parents to 'walk' again, parents should thus be given back the *archein* as well as the *prattein*, and thus the possibility to take initiatives, to act (or refrain from acting) from their own motives and understanding of their situation.

Criticizing the technical parenting (support) account, different scholars try to shift the attention from the expert to the parent. Smedts (2008) wants educational experts and parenting practitioners to escape from the technological framing of parents and to leave room for questions that parents have *as* parents. She remarks that the narrow technical conception of parenting can hardly be maintained by the parent, so 'professionals who work with parents should address

them not just as pawns in the system that can be steered by technical reason, but – very differently – as people who are capable of independent practical judgement'. (122)

Ramaekers and Suissa (2012) also stress the importance of addressing parents directly. They criticize the technical conception of parenting (support) and believe

> [t]he various techniques of good parenting are offered as 'solutions' to reduce parental anxiety. The strategies offered by gurus such as Supernanny, backed up by the reassurance of 'scientific evidence', assure us that they will lead to desirable outcomes. All our focus then shifts to individuals and how they perform, and likewise, the potential of perfect parenting becomes a real vision. If I can only do it right, maybe one can dispel, once and for all the anxiety. (128)

Drawing on Cavell, instead of trying to resolve human anxiety, they suggest parent[80] support should try to accept it and to accept the longing after certainty, that is its flipside. In what they somewhat hesitatingly call 'a way of conceptualising parent support' (132), they believe

> we need to learn to live with the continuous temptations to certainty. (…) It is not (…) the uncontrollability of life as such that we need to learn to live with, but our continuous attempts at control, our continuous attempts at fixing the world and others in it. It is, thus, in a sense, *ourselves* we have to learn to live with. (135, *emphasis mine*)

And thus parent support along these Cavellian lines needs to address parents *qua* parents. This line of argument leads to a second reason to engage with parents *qua* parents:

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80 They write about 'parent support' and not 'parent*ing* support'!

> [W]hat parents are in danger of losing in relying heavily or being made to rely heavily on, for example, the scientific languages of parenting, is a full realisation of what they are doing, a realisation of whatever meaning they can give from the perspective of the first person. (135)

This would mean that current practices of parent support entail this loss, and put the other way around, genuine parent support should help parents realize what they are doing, what meaning they can give from the first person perspective; which once more would mean that parent support has to address parents *qua* parents first of all.

Ramaekers and Suissa contrast the determinacy of parenting (support) accounts with the open-endedness of the experience of being a parent. In the former, 'ends' can be achieved, can be evaluated, parenting can be 'successful'. While on the other hand,

> the hopes, aspirations and aims we have as parents (…) do not appear as fixed and desirable end points associated with potential approaches which, once identified and followed, can be reliably achieved; rather they confront us in varied, unpredictable and subtly changing forms as a constitutive part of the experience of living as a human being who also happens to be the parent of another human being. (82)

So questions as 'What can I do to make my child happy?', 'What does it mean to say that an individual child is not happy?' or 'How do I live with the concern for, the pain about, my children's unhappiness?' (…) are intrinsically open-ended questions. And

> being a parent means constantly asking such questions; asking, indeed, an infinite variety of similar questions that one could not possibly predict in advance; questions that themselves are thrown up by and derive their meaning from the experience of being a parent; and in asking them, parents are also asking questions about

> their own life: its meaning, its value, and its challenges. Yet, in the quest for 'scientific' parenting, this form of questioning is shut down (…). There is no room (…) for questions of meaning and value, for ambiguity and uncertainty. (82)

Parents are human beings that constantly pose questions of meaning and value, about their children's lives as well as their own[81]. Applied to their proposal of parent support, this means it should be a space for parents to ask their questions, and perhaps where they are helped to live with the fact that no definite answers are available, instead of overruling them with not only answers, but also questions. (And this is perhaps a third reason to address parents directly.)

Smeyers, drawing on the work of Charles Taylor, reminds us that, 'we [as educators, as parents] are continuously forced to re-evaluate our values' (2008, 59, *my translation*). Following up on this, in a conception of parent support, parents could also be given the space and the time to re-evaluate their values, or to talk about the re-evaluation of their values[82]. So instead of suggesting, as Furedi does,[83] that parents should ignore parenting expertise and support, and should try to escape the overload of attention they get, the scholars I draw upon here seem to say the opposite: address parents more directly and explicitly, *qua* parents. But, this conception of parenthood requires a revision of what it means to be someone who provides support.

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81 Contrary to how Reece (2013) reads Ramaekers and Suissa, this is not how parents *should* be, but how parents actually are.

82 Cf. Van den Berge 2012.

83 See for instance the new subtitle of the second edition (2008) of his *Paranoid Parenting*: 'Why ignoring the experts may be best for your child.'

An ethics of hermeneutics in parent support: a preliminary conception of the parent counsellor as a figure of strong engagement

Taylor argues (Chapter 2, 69-73; Van den Berge and Ramaekers 2014, 612-615) that human agency is engaged agency, meaning that 'the world of the agent is shaped by his or her form of life, or history, or bodily existence'. Making sense of things implies always partly unarticulated *backgrounds* (Taylor 1995, 69). So it is humanly impossible to interpret without drawing from a background that always remains partly opaque. A figure of strong disengagement is logically inconceivable and existentially unliveable, and that is why for Taylor Freud, for instance, is an example of what I want to call a 'figure of weak disengagement', because scientific values paradoxically made up his moral background (Taylor 1989, 45; Chapter 2, 78-81; Van den Berge and Ramaekers 2014, 618-621).

Within the technical parenting (support) account, the parenting expert, as a self-declared disengaged agent, mistakenly believes she can abstract herself and the subject under investigation from this sense-making condition. Since this ultimately isn't possible, this means that the figure of *weak* disengagement, as I want to call it, will actively strive for – but ultimately never reach – values as objectivity, measurability, generalisability, personal detachment of one's own (moral and other) preferences and so on. For an expert as a figure of disengagement it can be seen as problematic to become personally involved, whereas for a figure of engagement it is, as we will see, inevitable and even desirable. We human beings are engaged agents, all the time, and all the way down. This seems to be easily forgotten in our time, even when we are dealing with the very personal domain of childrearing, and thus it is worthwhile to try to develop, or perhaps retrieve, a more confident figure of (strong) engagement, by *articulating, valuing and advocating an engaged stance*.

The movement from a figure that values and strives for a disengaged stance, and does not acknowledge the necessity of background or context for sense-making to be conceivable, to a figure that not only accepts the idea of a necessary sense-making background for herself as well as for the parents, but moreover *takes it emphatically as its point of departure*, can be described in terms of explanation versus understanding, or *Erklären* versus *Verstehen*[84]. Thiselton (2009) explains the difference:

> [M]any writers on hermeneutics distinguish between the two valid dimensions of *explanation* and *understanding*. The axis of explanation is more akin to the traditional flow of knowing; understanding entails a more personal, intuitive, or suprarational dimension. (9)

He also points out that

> [T]he more creative dimension of hermeneutics depends more fundamentally on the receptivity of the hearer or reader to *listen with openness*. To appreciate and appropriate what we seek to understand with sensitivity have priority over the traditional method of scrutinizing 'objects' of 'perception', thought and knowledge. This 'listening' dimension is often described as part of the process of '*understanding*' in contrast to the more rational, cognitive, or critical dimension of '*explanation*'. (7-8)

In order to accomplish *understanding* in human affairs, a specific hermeneutical effort is necessary. Since hermeneutics traditionally was the art of interpreting texts, typically of the Biblical canon, it can seem strange to apply this approach to the domain of parent support. But, Taylor stresses

> Heidegger, and after him Gadamer and Ricoeur, pointed out that something like the hermeneutical circle obtains in our attempts to

84 I do not however agree with the idea that explanation would have to be excluded from an engaged stance completely. For Ricoeur (Thiselton 2009, 229), following on this respect Schleiermacher, explanation is an important form of human interpretation.

> understand (…) 'human meanings'. The 'texts' here can be events, passages in the life of individuals, or societies, or human history; or we can start from individual experiences: feelings, actions, decisions, and try to determine their meaning. Whatever meaning we attribute to the part has to make sense within the whole, whose meaning it also helps determine. (2016, 218-219)

Schleiermacher, who was the first to develop the modern hermeneutics that Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur amongst others further elaborated, gave the following example of the hermeneutical circle very early on in his work:

> One must already know a man in order to understand what he says, and yet one first becomes acquainted with him by what he says. (Schleiermacher 1977, 56)

So Schleiermacher had already accepted the idea that the 'text' could be 'something a man says' meaning also that 'knowing a man' can be considered as the 'whole text'. I rendered Schleiermacher's early phrasing of the hermeneutical circle as follows in the field of counselling and psychotherapy: 'to understand the client, you need "context information" that you can only get through understanding the client' (Van den Berge 2014a 7, *translation mine*). The hermeneutical circle points at a deep interdependence in meaning: no context without person, no person without context.

But, the idea of a hermeneutical circle also coincides with the human experience that there is indeed a kind of deficit in life, as well as in human understanding, that cannot be removed completely. The hermeneutical process of understanding is never completed. Likewise human life never reaches a point of complete immanence, of being identical and completely clear to itself. In fact, there is always friction. In that sense hermeneutics has an open-endedness similar to that of life itself. Hermeneutics exists by virtue of the impossibility of ever closing the circle. Parents have to deal with this deficit continuously.

Whereas a parenting expert conceived as a figure of (weak) disengagement has an epistemic advantage and is thus perfectly equipped to counsel the parent, a parent counsellor *as a figure of (strong) engagement* will really want to understand a parent, and is epistemically disadvantaged. This figure will thus need to take her time to listen with openness, with a great amount of receptivity, resisting attempts to explain what she hears, and trying rather to engage in a more personal and intuitive way. This all seems perhaps too obvious, and will thus need to be developed further, not exhaustively, in three ways: (1) the role of story-telling and story-development is pivotal; (2) *involvement* is hermeneutically conceived of as 'being interpreted'; (3) this all comes with specific forms of responsibility on the part of the counsellor, derived from a non-causal notion of 'influence'.

Firstly, this 'figure of engagement' not only listens to the questions that often lead parents to seek the parent counsellor, but also to their stories. Wittgenstein remarks that in order to get friction, we need to go back to the 'rough ground', or, to put it in other words, we need to move ourselves into a space where the import of context in linguistic and hence human affairs is fully acknowledged and appreciated. Following Arendt's idea of *plurality*, (1958, 175-176) the context of everybody involved in parent support has to be taken as radically idiosyncratic, or one of a kind. Since – as Heidegger pointed out: the context of the 'da' of 'Dasein' is not 'box'-like – , it is not possible to know people's context from the outside[85]. We need insider's stories, in the case of the parent, to get to know the parents' context, and this means entering the hermeneutical circle. Taylor (2016, 291-292) wants to

> defend the idea that stories give us an understanding of life, people, and what happens to them which is peculiar (i.e., distinct from what other forms, like works of science and philosophy, can give us), and also unsubstitutable (i.e., what they show us can't be translated without remainder into other media)'. (…) A story often

85 See Polt 1999, 42.

> consists in a diachronic account of how some state or condition (usually the terminal phase) came to be. This can illuminate things in various ways. It often gives us an idea of 'how things came to be', in the sense of explaining why or giving causes. It can also offer insight into what this terminal phase is like: we can perhaps now appreciate more its fragility or permanence, or its value or drawbacks, and the like. (…) [I]t can lay out a gamut of different ways of being human, different paths or characters which interact in the story, and thus offer insights in human life in general. (…) [T]he thesis is here to the effect that valid insight in the above matters can be given in a story which cannot be transposed to the medium of science, atemporal generalization, and the like.

Narratives or stories reveal something that cannot be captured in the language of science or atemporal generalization. Moreover, the meeting with a parent counsellor will itself become a story, with a diachronic structure, that leads to changes in the self-understanding of those involved in the encounter. So Wittgenstein's suggestion (1984, 80) that two philosophers who meet should greet each other with the words 'Take your time' (*Lass dir Zeit*) might be appropriate here too. It is only if they do that a genuine encounter between two (or more) human beings can take place, within this hermeneutical framework.

Secondly, according to Thiselton,

> [I]n hermeneutics, it is *the text itself* (or what a person seeks *to understand*) that almost operates as the active subject, exposing and interrogating the human inquirer as *its object* of scrutiny. This in contradistinction to the 'traditional philosophical [scientific] approach' where the subject under scrutiny has a passive role.

Thiselton uses the writings of Funk, who himself draws on the work of Fuchs, to give a telling example of how a text can 'interpret' the listener or reader.

> Robert Funk (…) illustrates the dynamics of this epistemological flow of understanding with the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The parable traces the journey of the younger son from his desire for independence into estrangement, destitution, dereliction, and finally utter remorse. At his wits' end, he determines to return to his father, seeking only the status of a hired laborer. Yet his father runs to welcome him, and restores his personal dignity through the gifts of a ring, a robe and shoes. However, the parable turns also on the attitude of the elder son. He resents the generous and lavish welcome for the prodigal, and refuses to join in the welcome in angry indignation, because he views the comparison between the younger son's conduct and his welcome as flagrantly unjust to him.
>
> Of the elder son Funk writes: 'He refuses to be identified as a sinner because he is righteous and has no need of the grace of God. The word of grace and the deed of grace divide the audience into younger sons and elder sons – into sinners and Pharisees. This is what Ernst Fuchs means when he says that one does not interpret the parables: *the parables interpret him*'. (Thiselton 2009, 8-9)

This means that '[t]he interpreter of texts is not a neutral observer, on the analogy of the supposed stance of the natural scientist or empiricist. Understanding in the fullest sense demands *engagement and self-involvement*' (Thiselton 2009, 8). In order to counsel parents, as a figure of engagement, one needs to know them; in order to get to know them, the counsellor has to listen to the stories people tell. But, this also means that (s)he will be 'interpreted' by them, since, as we saw, people and their stories can be considered as 'texts'. Letting oneself be 'interpreted' by another person and her stories means accepting that one's autobiographical self-understanding can be changed, and that one accepts this changeability, or this wanting to be affected by someone's stories. The psychotherapist Michael White accounts for the effects of working with families and individual clients in terms of 'being moved',

> moved not just in terms of having an emotional experience, but in terms of being transported to another place from which one might, amongst other developments: a) have a new perspective on one's life and history and identity, b) re-engage with neglected aspects of one's own history, c) make new meanings of experience not previously understood, d) invite steps in one's life otherwise never considered, e) think beyond what one routinely thinks, and so on. (White, 2004, 49,50)

White is not talking here about his clients' experiences, but of the experiences of those who work with them as therapists or counsellors. This is not to say of course that clients do not have analogous experiences. If we listen to each other's stories, then *we* will be 'interpreted' by each other. And this is the point I want to make here[86]. Parent support should be about creating 'momentum', which can *also* be interpreted as allowing oneself to be 'moved', i.e. not only the parent, but also the parent counsellor. Parents can be moved only when their idiosyncratic circumstances are first recognized and acknowledged. They can revise their self-understandings, and their understandings of the world, and be *moved* to another place, if and only if they feel the parent counsellor (or another human being for that matter) is really trying to understand them, and letting these understandings exist as such, without necessarily agreeing with them[87].

A third point is that since whatever the counsellor does will belong to the clients' self-understanding, and thus (deeply) influence it, the former will have to be careful and take responsibility for what she shares of her interpretations with the latter. Being a 'professional' counsellor

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86 Compare this with Dreyfus and Taylor (2016), 125-126, where, in considering the possibility of intercultural exchange, they refer to Gadamer's idea of a fusion of horizons. For instance: 'If understanding the other is to be construed as fusion of horizons and not as possessing a science of the object, then the slogan might be: no understanding the other without a changed understanding of the self.' (125) or 'Real understanding always has an identity cost (...). The cost appears as such from the standpoint of the antecedent identity, of course.' (125-126).

87 This is of course an empirical point. My professional experience, together with that of many others, teaches us, indeed, that this is the case. No-one can change an interpretation if this interpretation is not allowed to exist first.

will thus mean that there has been a sufficiently long training that is not so much about knowledge of parenting but rather of having acquired sufficient experience of dealing with such issues as 'when do I speak?', 'when do I withhold my suggestion or my question?', and so on. Openness to listen is not the same as openness about oneself.

Whereas the parenting expert is mostly not someone most parents actually meet, and as such remains a bit abstract or unknown, the figure of engagement I tried to develop (or retrieve) has to be someone that one meets, not necessarily face-to-face, but at least 'in person'. Furthermore, there are many requirements that a professional counsellor has to satisfy. Many books and papers have been written on this subject[88] and this is not the place to elaborate on it, but notwithstanding this, we could say that learning to know very different parenting contexts, including learning about how existing expertise is interpreted by parents i.e. how it influences them; listening without judging or explaining what the problem is; using scientific knowledge, not as a framework that 'frames parents' (Chapter 3; Van den Berge 2017), but as a possible resource to help parents understand certain phenomena they encounter; and so on, could perhaps indeed be called professional know-how that counsellors need to acquire through training, (peer) supervision, lots of practice and not in the least knowledge of life.

Conclusion

One of the questions concerning our late modern western cultures that the case of parent*ing* support confronts us with, is why we are so easily lured into accepting fictional and empirically empty accounts

88 In the Dutch speaking part of Europe for instance much work has been done or is currently done by van der Pas (see for instance her dissertation *A serious case of neglect* (2003) and the 10 volume textbook on the theory and practice of parent counselling *Handboek Methodische Ouderbegeleiding (1993-2008);* Baert (2001, 1997), Van Daele (2004); Van Daele and Vermeire 2009, Cottyn (2009); Weille (2010); Vermeire (2011, 2012) , Van den Berge 2014b and Remmerswaal and de Gouw (2016) to name only a few. In The Netherlands the leading journal for professionals is *Ouderschapskennis*, formerly *Ouderschap en ouderbegeleiding*) (www.ouderschapskennis.nl).

of what we deem on the other hand to be so very important, i.e., the upbringing of our offspring. Disconnected from lived experiences, *the rough ground*, the world of parenting becomes a fairy-tale like world, where every problem supposedly can be identified and resolved, because there is only one deficit, and that is the deficit of scientific knowledge, which can and should be overcome by acknowledging it and hiring experts or studying textbooks. If we on the other hand accept a hermeneutical stance, this implies that the existential parental deficit cannot be removed without a remainder.

It is (of course) not possible to take into account the inevitably idiosyncratic and finite nature of human agency and experiences completely, for this is part and parcel of this hermeneutical deficit. While 'parenting support', especially when it takes the form of websites or parenting manuals, can ignore this, 'personalized' parent support, often in the form of counselling, has to deal with it somehow. To try to do so, it will have to take some considerations into account. I have tried to develop these in a preliminary normative conception of the *figure of strong engagement* as opposed to the parenting expert as a *figure of weak disengagement*. This figure of *strong* engagement meets the requirement of opening up a space for parents that acknowledges the import of context in human and parental affairs. This figure accepts parents as being ethically and politically orientated. (S)he does not problematize not knowing or doubting; nor does (s)he exclude moral issues, or dilemmas that parents can encounter because of conflicting values. Since (and insofar as) she does not have an agenda of her own, parents are not seen as the passive recipients of support, but in fact regain and take up an active role, by becoming de *facto* moral and political agents.

Although it focuses on the position of the professional, this conception articulates the conditions that allow for the creation of parental *momentum;* this is a state in which parents – with or without the help of a parent counsellor – can endure and perhaps even embrace the frictions that are constitutive of being a parent, and can (be) move(d) along the different dimensions as enumerated by Michael White.

CONCLUSION

Parent*ing* or *parent* support? From an *ethics of causality* towards an *ethics of hermeneutics* (and back)

Parent*ing* or *parent* support? From an *ethics of causality* towards an *ethics of hermeneutics* (and back)

The overall conjecture that underlies these philosophical investigations of our contemporary parenting (support) culture was that 'even the domain of the very subjective, lived experiences of being a parent, is at least affected, and maybe even colonized by the disengaged scientific stance.' There were four 'smaller' conjectures: (1) in our late-modern Western societies, parents are supposed or expected to be in need of some kind of support; (2) parenting support is often science-based; (3) parents seem to be infantilized and instrumentalized; (4) nevertheless, there seems to be a possibility of conceptualizing practices of parenting support and counselling that take parents seriously as the full-blown moral and political subjects they are. The purpose of these investigations was to follow these 'signposts' in order to give an interpretation of certain phenomena, to make sense of them, or to try at least to elaborate and clarify them a little bit. Chapter Four deals most emphatically with conjecture (1) and (4), chapters Two and Three address and elaborate conjecture (2), while conjecture (3) is discussed in chapter Three.

In this concluding chapter I want to bring the different threads together. As concerns the overall conjecture, I would rather conclude now that 'the *colonization*' has to be seen as a continuous process of attempts to tempt parents to look through 'disengaged' lenses, a process that isn't finished yet, as Chapter Three made clear, which means that (on the empirical plane) many parents probably still have to be

convinced. In that sense the 'disengaged stance', as mentioned by Taylor, has only to a certain extent *a* grip on us; we can still resist. Indeed, as with all colonizations, there is always space for resistance or there are always elements that cannot be fully colonized. One of the signs of this 'grip' is that we see in our parenting (support) culture how tendencies arise to place a high value on understanding in terms of causal-mechanistic explanations, as a means to understand our children as well as to understand the relationships we have with them.

We saw this predominance of *causality*, surprisingly, in Furedi's rather unsuccessful attempt (as I showed in Chapter One) to help parents out. The attempt was unsuccessful in the sense that treating evolutions at the level of society as causal phenomena, that stand in a sense outside our self-understandings, threatens to widen the gap between the individual and the broader community or society he or she belongs to. This approach strengthens the very paranoia it is supposed to remedy. We saw this predominance of causality also (Chapter Two) in the way some parenting experts conceive of parental *influence*. Conceiving of interactions in causal-mechanistic ways leads to a parenting paradox. These examples are, I believe symptomatic of an 'overrating' or 'overvaluing' of certain aspects of something we rightly value, namely science. Science penetrates our everyday material surroundings in a very silent and self-evident way (we have potable water in our homes, we take electric currents as something obvious, we use clocks, phones, computers, cars, and so on, without realizing how much of our surroundings would be very different without science). It is not possible nor desirable to banish science from our *material surroundings*. In the same sense it is not possible to drive away all science from the domain of childrearing or personal relationships. But, what we can conclude from our study of our current parenting support culture is that boundaries between the world and a science of *objects* on the one hand and the world and a science of *subjects* on the other tend to be fuzzy.

An ethics of causality versus an ethics of hermeneutics

In Chapter Four I tried to sketch an *ethics of hermeneutics*, that demands an interpretative effort, namely the effort to try to understand the *idiosyncrasies* of human affairs. To understand what it means for parents to hear for instance that their child is diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder one has to listen carefully to these parents. Qualitative scientific research could show that most parents show signs of relief when they learn that their child isn't just naughty. But still, because sense-making contexts should be considered to be unique within an *ethics of hermeneutics*, no expert can ever know with certainty before asking and being told by the parents themselves, what things mean for parent(s). So establishing a (professional) personal relationship between experts or counsellors and parents will be necessary. The counsellor will need to be a figure of strong engagement. Within an *ethics of hermeneutics,* the role of parents cannot be restricted to executing the wisdom of parenting experts.

But there seems to be a problem here. No one will seriously doubt that parenting experts have the best intentions towards parents and their children: their understanding is informed by ethical demands too. An example that was already quoted[89] in Ramaekers and Suissa (2012, 20-21) can make this clear. The Belgian child psychiatrist Adriaenssens explains the aggressive behaviour of a schoolboy in terms of brain-science. Understanding the boy's misbehaviour in terms of the functioning of parts of his brain is necessary in order to excuse him, give him a second chance in the eyes of the school principal. Doing this constitutes an act that for Adriaenssens apparently is *strongly valued* in Taylor's sense of the word. Although the principal perhaps would like to expel the boy from school, Adriaenssens obviously believes it is better to try to understand his behaviour in terms of causal endocrinological and neurological processes[90]. To fill the hiatus, I want to introduce

89 See also footnote 60.

90 And as such he is a figure of disengagement in the weak sense of the word.

the term *ethics of causality* as opposed to the *ethics of hermeneutics* that I started to develop in Chapter Four. What the latter requires is that one is interested in the boy's story; that one wants to know *what* precisely it is that upset *him;* that one prefers an understanding in terms of his self-understanding and his understanding of the world[91], or of what he deems important and so on. In contradistinction, an *ethics of causality* prescribes that the boy's misbehaviour *should* be understood in terms of a causal-mechanistic explanation. The *Whole-brain-child* is a book that explains the behavior of children in causal-mechanistic terms:

> 'Sibling rivalry is like so many other issues that make parenting difficult – tantrums, disobedience, homework battles, discipline matters, and so on. As we'll explain in the coming chapters, these everyday parenting challenges result from a *lack of integration* within your child's brain. The reason her brain isn't always capable of integration is simple: it hasn't had the time to develop. In fact, it's got a long way to go, since a person's brain isn't considered fully developed until she reaches her mid-twenties.' (WBC, 9-10)

The way parents are advised to react is also informed by causal-mechanistic explanations.

> So that's the bad news: you have to wait for your child's brain to develop. That's right. No matter how brilliant you think your preschooler is, she does not have the brain of a ten-year-old, and won't for several years. The rate of brain maturation is largely influenced by the genes we inherit. But the degree of integration may be exactly what we can influence in our day-to-day parenting.

91 Cf. Taylor 2016, 117: 'I am using "world" in a Heidegger-derived sense to designate our surroundings in their significance to us.'

> *The good news is that by using everyday moments, you can influence how well your child's brain grows toward integration.* (WBC, 10)

This discussion raises the question of why one should prefer an *ethics of hermeneutics*, if both approaches constitute ethical behavior. On what points do they differ from each other? Causal explanations are external and imply third person perspectives: one must ignore the idiosyncratic self-understandings of those involved. An *ethics of causality* demands an effort to inform oneself as an expert by drawing on scientific findings, not necessarily in the field of education but also of psychology, endocrinology, neurosciences and so on. It requires that the expert listen very carefully to parents' stories, not in order to understand what these mean for parents, but rather to explain what is happening from within scientific causal-mechanistic frameworks, and to subsume problems under more general categories. A personal contact between the expert and the parent(s) is not required. An ethics of causality rather requires a disengagement on the part of the expert, for instance by abstaining from having more personal contact than is absolutely necessary, ignoring non-causal factors, withholding interest in meanings or feelings, and so on. This disengagement furthermore specifies a conception of 'influence' as causal too.

Influence: causal or hermeneutical?

When influence is conceived of as causal this means that there is no difference in principle between how 'genes *influence* the maturation of a brain' and how 'parents *influence* the integration of the child's brain'. We have seen however in Chapter Two that 'influence' can be conceived of not only as *causal* but also as *hermeneutical*. We can draw on Dunne's analyses of the classical Greek philosophical concepts *poiesis* (making) and *praxis* (doing) to spell out the difference between a causal-mechanistic interpretation of influence and a hermeneutical one. *Poiesis* means having 'causal influence on the materials used', while *praxis* means having 'influence' in a hermeneutical sense: one

never can predict completely how others will *interpret* one's actions, and thus how they will react in response; and thus how they themselves will appear as persons to others and to themselves.

> [T]he agent is invested in his action more completely than the producer is in his product. Whereas the latter can stand outside his materials and allow the productive process to be shaped by the impersonal form which he has objectively conceived, the agent on the other hand is constituted through the actions which disclose him both to others and to himself as the person that he is. He can never possess an idea of himself in the way that the craftsman possesses the form of his product; rather than his having any definitive 'what' as blueprint for his actions or his life, he becomes and discovers 'who' he is through these actions. And the medium for this becoming through action is not one over which he is sovereign master; it is, rather, a network of other people who are also agents and with whom he is bound up in relationships of interdependency. (Dunne 1997, 263)

And:

> When a craftsman 'acts' on suitable materials in order to produce an artefact which is comfortably within his or her proficiency, there is a predictability about success which is commensurate with this proficiency itself. However, when one's actions are not imposed on materials but are directed toward other persons, such mastery is not attainable. One cannot determine in advance the efficacy of one's words and deeds. *Efficacy turns out to be a form of influence; it lies not so much in one's own operation as in the cooperation of others. The nature and extent of this cooperation cannot be counted beforehand, and even afterwards one cannot be sure just what it has been.* (ibid, 359, *emphasis mine*)

I believe that the distinction between and ethics of causality and an ethics of hermeneutics is a useful way in which to understand the different conceptions of 'influence' discussed here.

Problems with a one-sided adhering to an ethics of causality

There are many reasons[92] to be at least cautious before engaging uncritically in an ethics of causality:

(1) *Inequality is introduced.* An ethics of causality tends to take away a hermeneutical idea of influence and replace it with the idea of influence as (blind) causality, on the level of neurology and endocrinology as well as on the interpersonal relational level: When one does a and b, c and d will follow. This means outcomes are guaranteed if one follows the right procedures. Parents do not really need to know how the mechanisms work. The rule is: Experts (need to) know; parents (have to) execute. Parents can never become masters in the different scientific fields. Inequality or an asymmetric relation is thus installed. Parents will always need the expert's advice. Of course, parents cannot really be blamed for what they un-knowingly do wrong. This is perhaps one reason why so many efforts are invested in providing parents with the necessary knowledge. An informed parent cannot invoke ignorance as an excuse when things do go wrong.

(2) *Parents have a 'thin' identity.* An ethics of causality will not help experts or counsellors in the field of child rearing to see parents in a holistic way: next to parents they are also, for instance, spouses, or employees, or friends or daughters or sons, and so on. Next to

92 What I enumerate here are not like the results of an investigation in the field of natural sciences. In that sense they are not 'new'. I rather revisit preliminary insights, or perhaps re-articulate them, and I believe that my investigations provide the necessary background that allows for *these* (re-)interpretations.

educational beings they are also existential, moral and political beings. Therefore, an ethics of causality will help to give answers only to a very small part of parents' questions.

(3) *Trust is an irrelevant category.* There is a 'skein' of meanings that links causality with knowledge, a lack of confidence and even paranoia, as the Furedi example shows. If you as a parent have a lack of necessary knowledge to raise your child (i.e., if you accept this 'framing'), then you cannot trust yourself, or your instincts, or your friends or family. Still, you will need to trust someone who claims to have this knowledge. (In the technical parenting (support) account that I tried to articulate in the fourth chapter, a lack of knowledge in parents is presupposed, expected, maybe one could even say 'constructed'.) An ethics of causality puts more weight on 'knowing' than on 'trusting', whereas being a parent opens a space of questions that cannot be completely answered by providing them with more knowledge.

(4) *That parents can have an active supportive role is neglected.* An ethics of causality doesn't help parents to see that they are not only in need of support, but that they themselves can also develop all kinds of initiatives where they as parents are supportive of other parents, children or their communities and the society in which they live.

(5) *Parental self-understanding is not considered important.* An ethics of causality will not consider the worries parents might have about who they will become (in their own eyes and the eyes of people whom they consider important) when they execute the experts' wisdom. Parents are first and foremost executors.

So, it is necessary to further develop an ethics of hermeneutics in parent support, whatever form it takes, where understanding is preferred over explanation, and involvement over disengagement. This is not to say however that there would be no room left for causal explanation: it may be very important to understand how digestion works in an

infant, or what it means that certain parts of the brain haven't yet fully developed in a teenager. But these causal explanations should play a more modest role. In any event, scientific frameworks should never frame[93] parents (Chapter Three), because this framing entails the self-evident, dominant use of causal explanations.

Parental momentum vs. counselling momentum

Within the technical parenting (support) account that I sketched in Chapter Four, the promise is that if parents engage with their children in an objective, neutral and scientifically informed way, there will be good 'outcomes'. Within the technical parenting (support) account, parenting *experts* are framed as disengaged agents as well. In Chapter Four I offered, in a kind of countermovement, a preliminary account of a normative framework of the parent counsellor as *a figure of strong engagement*.

I want to use a distinction that is made by Heidegger in *Being and Time* in order to conceive of *parent counselling momentum*, as opposed to the *parental momentum* I introduced in Chapter Four. For Heidegger (1962, 158-159) there is a continuum of forms of caring for others, or solicitude, of which there are two extreme possibilities. The first one

> (…) can, as it were, take away 'care' from the Other and put itself in his position in concern: it can *leap in* for him. This kind of solicitude takes over for the Other that with which he is to concern

93 Framing typically puts the onus of proof with the one who has been 'framed'. When a small and marginal group of terrorists founds the 'Islamic State', and for instance governments like the Belgian accept this 'framing' in their communication, then the huge majority of Muslims will need to explain and convince others that they are not terrorists. In a similar sense, it becomes very difficult for parents to claim that they do not need any support from experts, be it psychologists, neuroscientists, endocrinologists and so on (Thanks to Najib Tuzani for making me aware of the analogy).

himself. The Other is thus thrown out of his own position; he steps back so that afterwards, when the matter has been attended to, he can either take it over as something finished and at his disposal, or disburden himself of it completely. In such solicitude the Other can become one who is dominated and dependent, even if this domination is a tacit one and remains hidden from him.

The second extreme

> (…) does not so much leap in for the Other as *leap ahead* of him in his existentiell potentiality-for-Being, not in order to take away his 'care' but rather to give it back to him authentically as such for the first time. This kind of solicitude pertains essentially to authentic care – that is, to the existence of the other, not to a 'what' with which he is concerned; it helps the Other to become transparent to himself *in* his care and to become *free for* it.

I interpret 'leaping ahead' in the context of supporting parents to mean that there's a 'realisation' of parents' worries in a double sense of the word: parents become aware of the problems they have, this is they become *real* for them, they *realize* they have them; and the problems become *a reality* shared by parent and professional. This means the parent counsellor will need to be able to endure the existence of the problems or worries without giving in to the inclination to do something about them, or to counsel parents by giving them advice, or to simply take the problems out of their hands and to become as such a better parent for the child.

This 'caring' relationship applies to the parent-child relationship as well as the parent counsellor or parenting expert-parent relationship. Let me apply this continuum to child rearing itself, through an example. When a child is young, it is considered appropriate to be on the

'leaping in' side of the spectrum[94], but the child becoming older will demand a shifting towards the other extreme. When e.g. a baby cries and is hungry, or is in some kind of pain, then a caring adult has to feed it or comfort it. When a sixteen-year-old boy has to do a project for school, it would not be considered appropriate for parents to perform this task in his place. He needs, rather, encouragement. His task has to be given back to himself, as something he has to deal with, whether he likes it or not. One might say still – and here I am saying more than Heidegger did –, that a rich and full form of care implies the possibility of *moving* from one side to the other on the continuum, or to be on different sides at the same time. When the sixteen-year-old son is very ill, his mother or father might still want to comfort him or take away his pain. This might be an example of 'parental momentum'.

Analogously there are situations imaginable where parents would like experts they consult to decide in their place and to literally take the care of their children out of their hands, for examples in some cases of severe medical or psychiatric problems. Then experts would be on the *leaping in* side of the care continuum, at the demand of the parents. On the other side of the continuum an expert can try to listen to the parents' worries as they articulate them themselves, and help them, encourage them to hold on, not by taking away their concerns, but by giving these concerns back to the parents as something they have to deal with and that ultimately can never be taken away from them, no matter how hard one tries to (re)frame them as neuropsychological or developmental psychological issues. Maybe an expert could understand that even in the former case, where parents ask them to take

94 This is reminiscent of what Langeveld (1965) would have called the grown-up acting as a substitute of the child. As Ramaekers (Forthcoming) points out, for Langeveld this 'substitution' is a matter for the grownup of finding the right balance as the child is growing up, since the child, being active in the process of upbringing, has 'an increasing duty to autonomously fulfill her task in life'. Ramaekers (Forthcoming) further explains: 'As long as the child is not yet capable of placing herself under the authority of a higher moral order, the grownup takes responsibility instead of the child. The grownup acts as a substitute for the child. She acts, literally, in the child's stead as long as the child is not capable of acting herself (i.e., acting responsibly). Clearly this "substitution" is a matter for the grownup of finding the right balance as the child is growing up, since the child, being active in the process of upbringing, has "an increasing duty to autonomously fulfill her task in life" (§15).'

over, parents will probably always need the support that is given in the latter case, where they are as it were 'given back their problems or worries as something they have to deal with themselves'. This *counselling momentum* may not be possible, however. An ethics of causality implies that it is the professional who knows more: only the expert knows what is really going on *in* the child (conceived of as an organism), or in the parent-child-interaction, because (s)he has epistemic access to the causal-mechanistic universe that the parent does not have. This means it is the expert and the expert alone who knows what has to be done. An ethics of causality will urge him to convince the 'executors' of the right way to act. An ethics of causality prevents the expert from being able to move freely from the 'leaping in' side of the continuum to the 'leaping ahead' side, because this would imply that (s)he is capable of just being there, without giving advice, only listening to the parents' stories. But knowing urges execution. So the parenting expert is in principle (unless (s)he leaves the ethics of causality behind) not capable of moving to the other side of the continuum. But if, on the other hand, a parent counselor (as a figure of engagement in the strong sense) really wants to be supportive of parents, they will need to be able to move freely, if necessary, over the continuum, and sometimes it will be helpful and necessary to hold still at the 'leaping in' side.

For all these reasons, causal-mechanistic logics should never be dominant and taken for granted; they should never become the 'default setting' when the purpose is to really support *parents*. So the predominant parenting (support) account is *in need of revision*. In order for parent support to be humane, I take it to be necessary that parents are always listened to and taken seriously in their unique and idiosyncratic situations, applying an ethics of hermeneutics. No book, nor website nor any other form of personal or impersonal parenting support that only draws on causal-mechanistic explanations can offer this.

However, as it is easier and cheaper for politicians and policymakers to provide mass information through websites, for instance, than to

engage and train parent-counsellors or try to find new, more personal ways of supporting parents, it is not unlikely that in the future an *ethics of causality* will continue to prevail in parent(ing) support.

What we learn from the case of 'parenting support' is that we need to retrieve from our late-modern moral backgrounds the far receded idea that backgrounds or contexts are necessary to make sense of things, a fortiori when it concerns children and their parents. The idea that *context* has a special import in epistemology is traced back by Taylor (1995b) to Kant's transcendental deduction as it was an original critique of the atomist view of empiricist modern philosophers. He sees Wittgenstein and Heidegger as very important figures in a holistic philosophical tradition. But both in fact broadened the scope: context is not only a necessary condition to know, but also to do and to live, to go about things in the world.

This dissertation contributes to this philosophical literature through an analysis of the case of our parenting (support) culture. By expanding the field of application of these originally philosophical critiques this dissertation in fact contributes to both fields. It makes philosophy into a richer domain that stands closer to what human beings (for instance as parents) are concerned about. It also brings a significant philosophical dimension to critique of contemporary parenting culture. Finally, a philosophical approach contributes to the development of normative frameworks that are of interest to professionals who are actually supporting parents.

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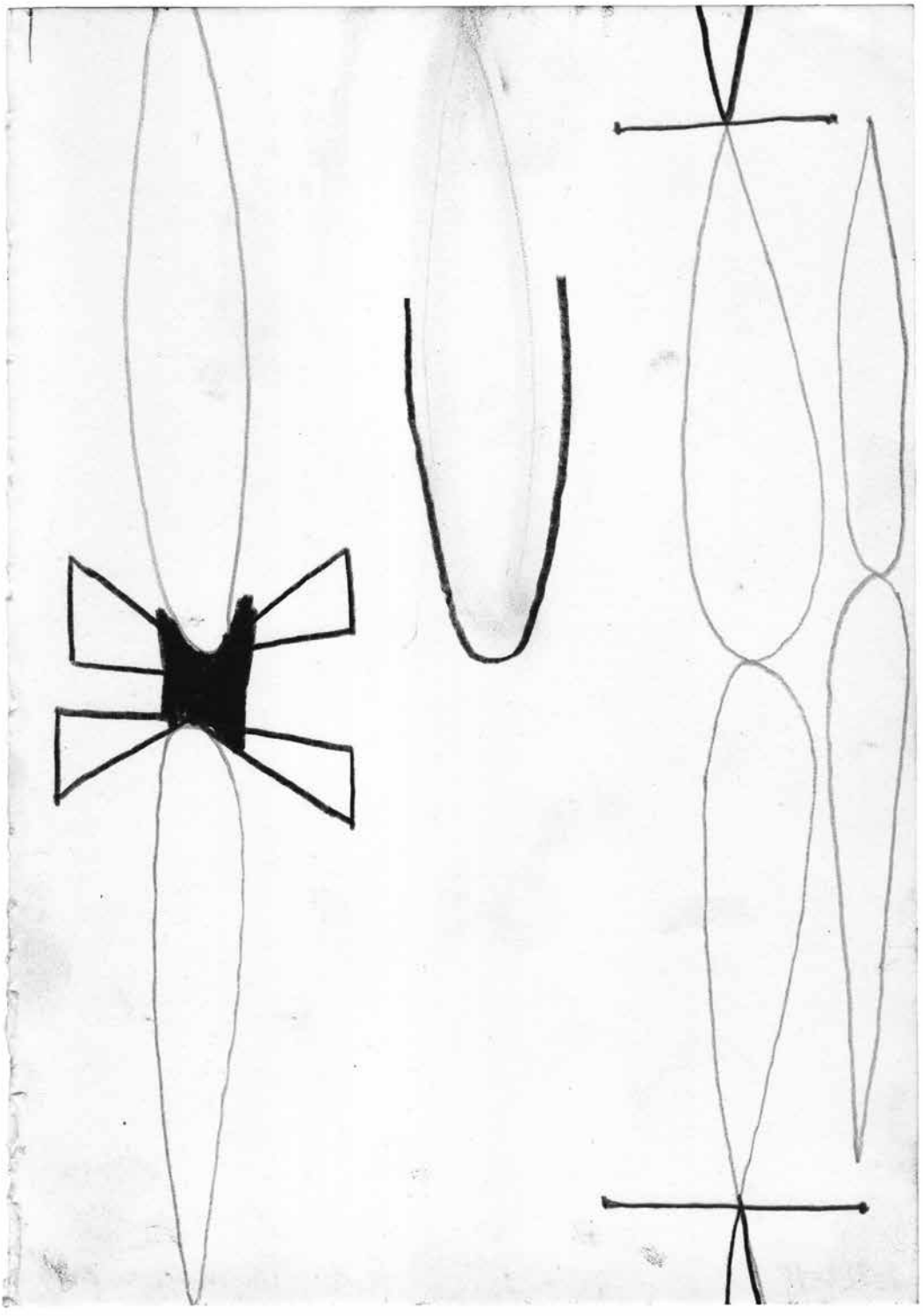
Ganz befriedigt durch den Eindruck eines Kunstwerks sind wir nur dann, wenn er etwas hinterlässt, das wir, bei allem Nachdenken darüber, nicht bis zur Deutlichkeit eines Begriffs herabziehen können.

We are entirely satisfied by the impression of a work of art only when it leaves behind something that, in spite of all our reflections on it, we cannot bring down to the distinctness of a concept.

– Arthur Schopenhauer



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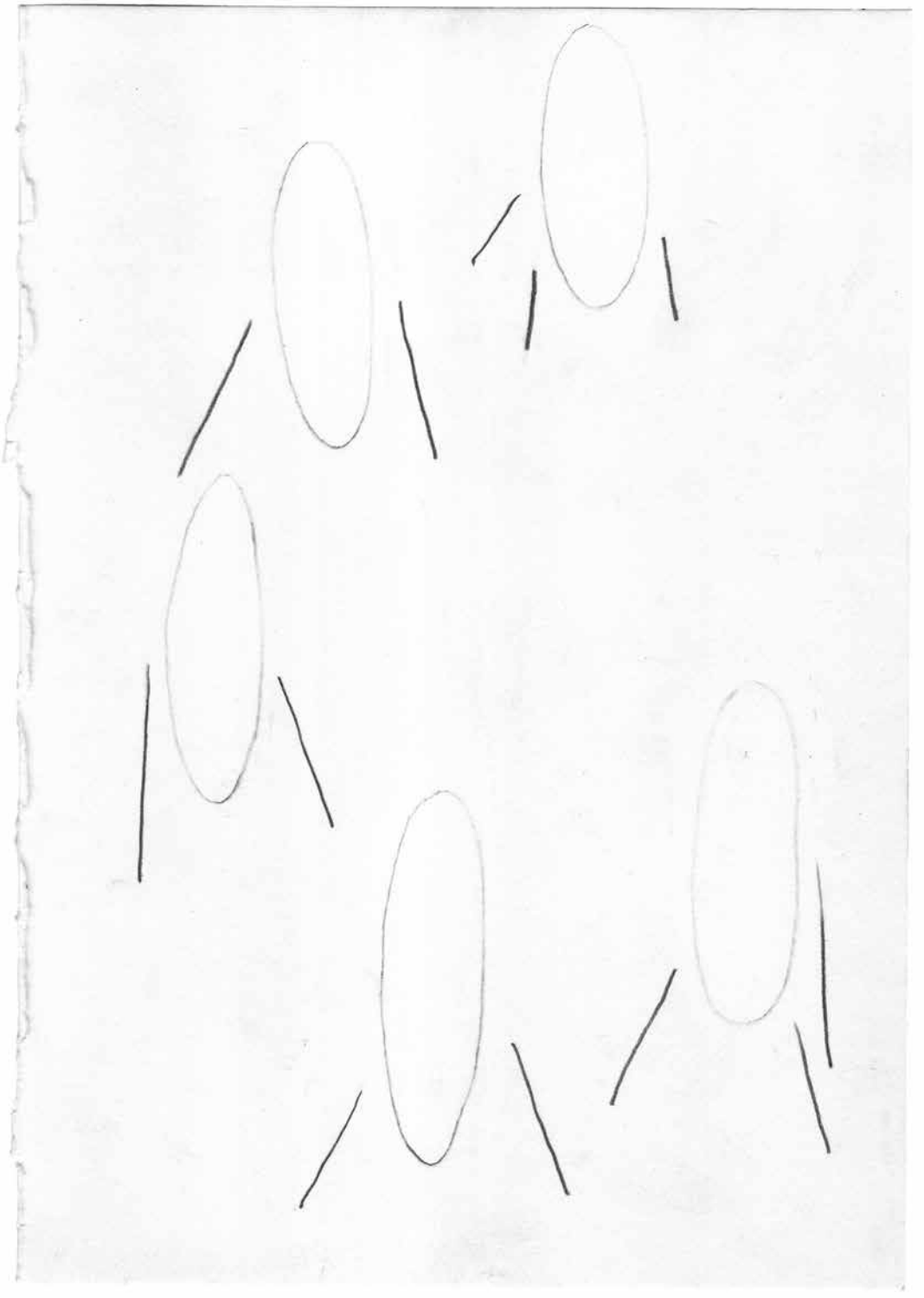

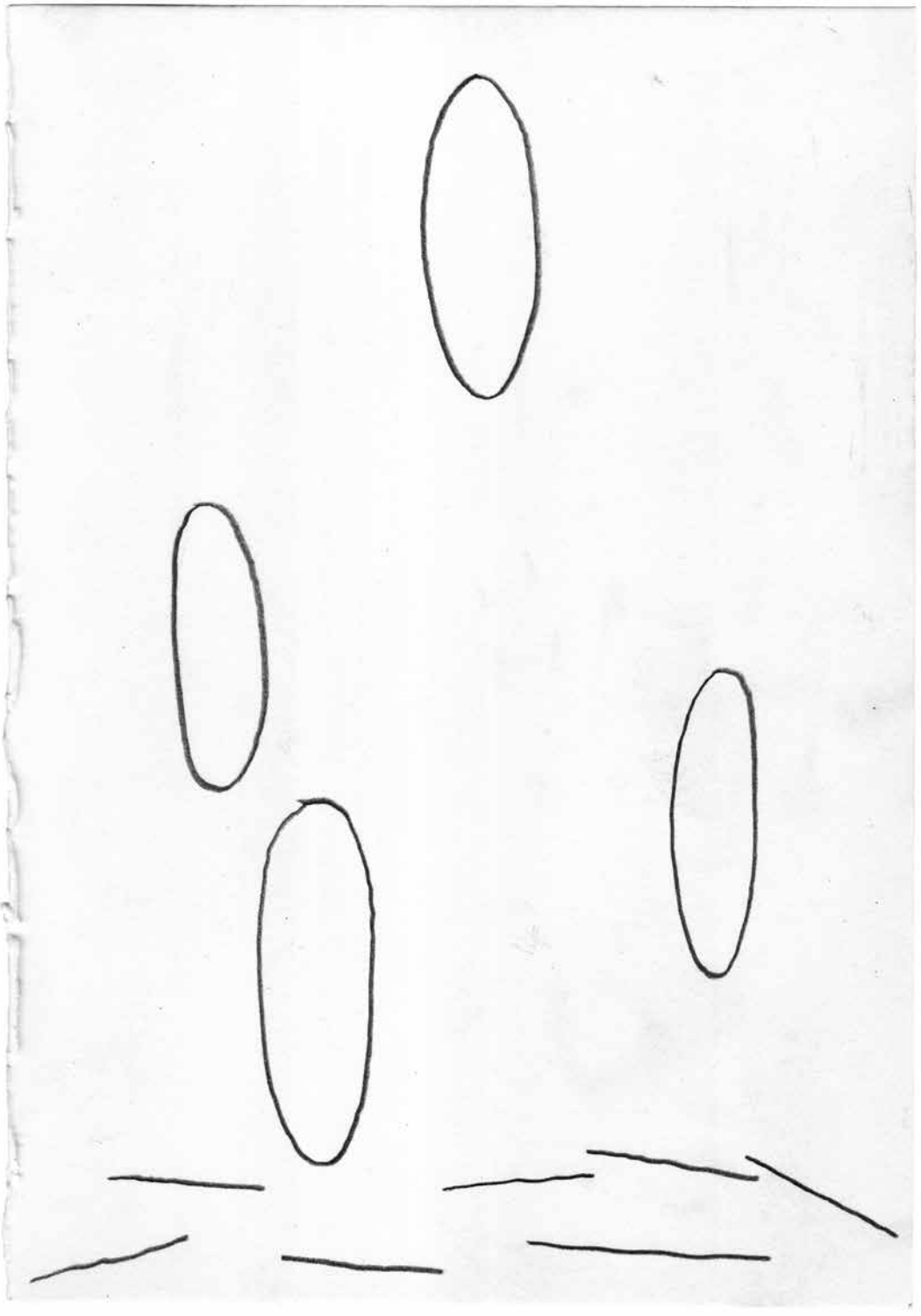

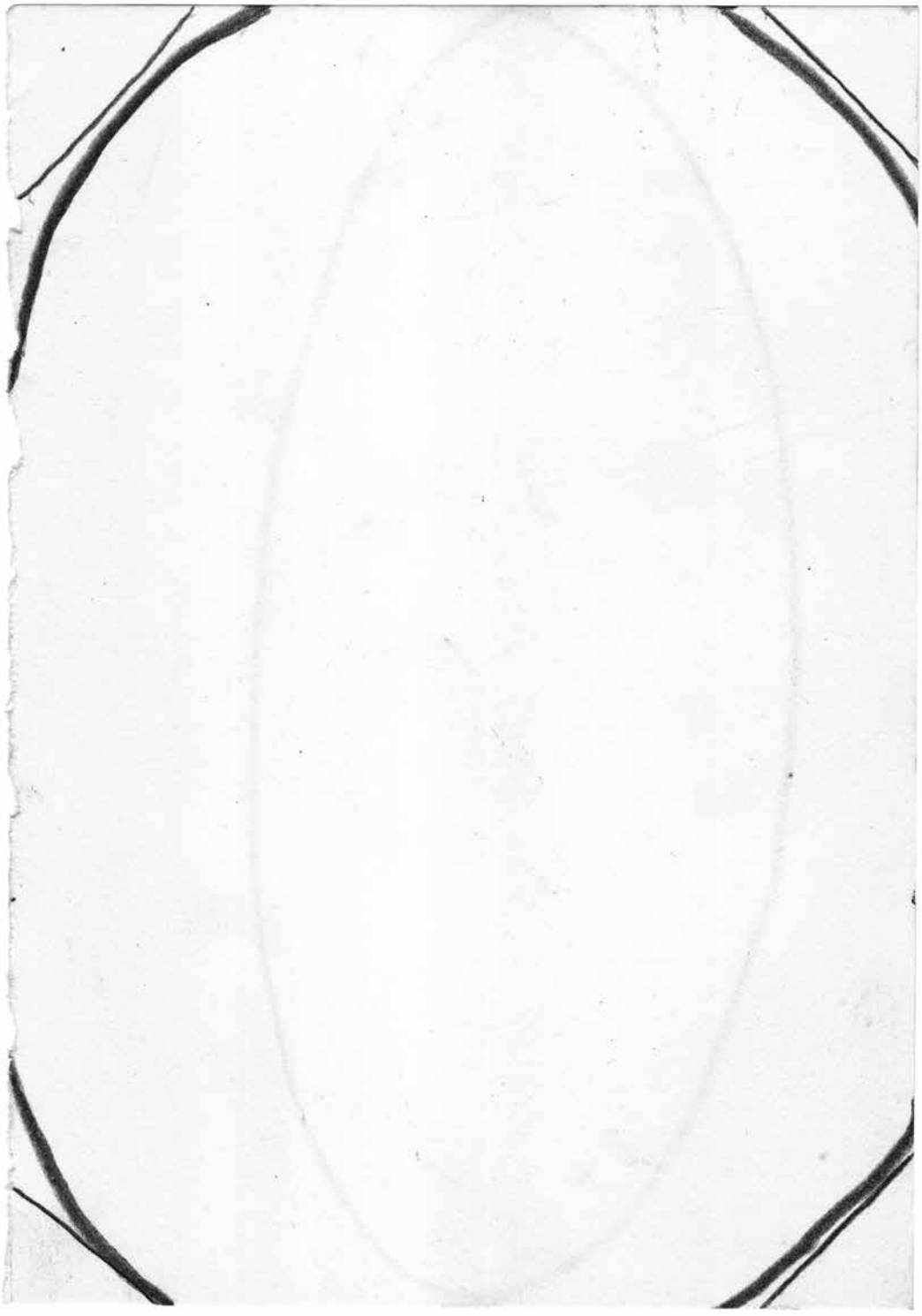

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